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Live at Irving Plaza, New York City

The Plastic People of the Universe
(July 18, 1998)

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"This is like ghost music, the best kind of ghost music," shouts a stout, middle-aged Czech man into my ear as the Plastic People wrap up "Elegy," a song about visiting graves. "It's about the reassuring power of being a ghost." He walks away, then returns to clarify his thought. "It's from the other side of fear!"



Some sense of what the Plastic People of the Universe mean to Czechs is revealed by this encounter. A band that, in other circumstances, might have been just one more late-'60s experimental rock combo has somehow come to focalize the discontent of several generations, from the teenage thrashers by the stage to the aging, bearded intellectuals in the upper balcony, even to this man who looks as if he might operate on the periphery of some dubious import/export firm. The Czechs have always specialized in aesthetic resistance to intolerable situations, and the Plastic People have their own odd place in this long history. Though they formed in the aftermath of the 1968 Soviet invasion, they're less political radicals than they are just the longest-running garage band in the history of music, more dissonant than dissident.

Of course, their garage lay on the outskirts of Prague, which makes quite a difference—there was a Skoda not a Chevy in the driveway, and the record collection ran beyond the obligatory Velvet Underground and Frank Zappa to classical string quartets and free jazz. The Plastic People, evolving during one of the chilliest periods of the Cold War, got their Western rock via remote feed, and this accounts for their weirdly unique sound. It's certainly rock—driving, elementary, and rebellious—but it's a rock lodged firmly in the Central European landscape.

From the beginning, the band's specialty has been in simple, nearly obsessive ostinatos that layer on top of themselves the spoken or chanted lyrics and the various improvisations—the vaguely Baroque harpsichord-like keyboard of Josef Janicek, the classically tinged viola and guitar of Jiri Kabes, and the free sax playing of Vratislav Brabenek, who doesn't so much develop musical ideas as set off a series of small acoustic explosions.

On their earliest albums, like *Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned* (which set to music the grimly humorous poems of the Czech writer of the same name) or the more elongated *Passion Play* (a musical recreation of the last days of Christ), the band played with a sparseness and detachment that seemed equal parts technological lack and existential restraint.

Their recent concert at the Intel New Music Festival, however, made clear that they've fleshed out their work in the intervening years. You could hardly call the music flabby, but what had once been a gaunt and thoughtful specter has now returned as a taut and muscular rocker. In the original version of "Elegy," for instance, the song's descending chukka-chuka rhythm is played alternately by solo viola, then the whole band, and then is sung a cappella as a sort of liturgical chant. It ends with a sharp drum thud like a coffin lid slamming.

Live, the band launched into it with full instrumentation, repeating the two-line refrain ("I spend Sundays and holidays / on my dear Momma's grave") over and over again as if it were a hyperkinetic drinking song.

Another of their best pieces, "Toxika," begins with a viola motif that repeats like some ravaged Bolero, while the guitarist picks out a tremulous opposing pattern. Bassist and vocalist Milan Hlavsa declaims the short, ironic poem of addiction and self-loathing as if he were making a radio announcement, then the guitar takes off on a long, fuzzy solo over the slowly decelerating violin.

In concert, however, the song had a sharper, jangly edge. It began in a swirl of feedback and cymbal work from which the violin and sax climbed with their repeating pattern. Newcomer Joe Karafiat's guitar raged across the sonic horizon for measure after measure before establishing one dirty, five-note riff. Hlavsa spat out the lyrics, and then the guitar climbed in again for an extended, effect-laden solo.

With his tie-dyed t-shirt and florescent orange guitar, Karafiat stood out against the mostly squab-colored band as distinctly as his guitar work stood out against their playing. He's certainly the hottest player of the group, but at the same time, much of the empty space of the originals has been filled in by his battery of rock quotations and embellishments. There's a sharp gain in professional musicianship, but a corresponding loss in the haunted quality that was the distinctive mark of the band.

Nevertheless, they stayed to their traditional songbook, playing mostly pieces drawn from *Egon Bondy*, and running through them in much the same order as their reunion CD from last year. Like Thelonious Monk, you might say, they've found a core repertoire that works for them and don't see much need to deviate from it. From the opening, pulsing horn and drums of "The Miraculous Mandarin" to the closing, full-bore psychedelia of "Magic Night" ("The time of magic night has come . . . we live in Prague,

that is where the Spirit itself will one day appear”)—where the rhythm section set up an undertow that took the song out to sea while former-Beefheart guitarist Gary Lucas contributed his complete hurricane cabinet of effects—the band played with a fierce joy.

The only regret is that they weren’t able to incorporate anything from *Passion Play*, by far their most innovative and difficult work. The brainchild of sax-player Brabenek, the piece displays the musical textures of the various members to their fullest, most startling effects. It sounds something like a collaboration between Ornette Coleman and Eastern Orthodox monks, as performed by Grand Funk Railroad. The band’s CDs are available from Skoda Records in Washington, D.C., or Globus International. Tamizdat, the organization that sponsored them, is hoping to bring them back for a tour with other Czech bands in the fall.

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(from *Signal to Noise: The Journal of Improvised and Experimental Music*)

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