

PLASTIC PEOPLE OF THE UNIVERSE TO **MOUNT FIRST U.S. TOUR**

PIONEERING JAZZ-ROCK SEPTET -- WHO PLAYED ROLE IN
LAUNCH OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S 'VELVET REVOLUTION' --
SET FOR 16 DATES IN NORTH AMERICA.

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More than 20 years after their music landed them in a Czechoslovakian jail on charges of disturbing the peace, legendary Czech Republic free-jazz/rock band the Plastic People of the Universe will launch their first-ever U.S. tour.

"We didn't perform [for much of the 1980s] because it was very risky to organize shows because of the secret police," explained the six-member band's saxophone player, Vratislav Brabanec. "It's exciting for every musician to play the U.S. and Canada. ... We are just excited to be able to play together again."

The group will begin their 16-date tour with a Feb. 23 show at the Middle East in Cambridge, Mass. The trip will feature a string of shows on the East Coast before heading to the Midwest and wrapping up with shows in San Francisco (March 12), Los Angeles (March 13) and San Diego (March 14).

Formed in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the Plastic People of the Universe are widely credited with helping to inspire the kind of free thinking and artistic expression that launched Czechoslovakia's "Velvet Revolution" of the late '80s and toppled the Communist government in 1989.

The band, influenced by such American artists as the Velvet Underground, the Doors and Frank Zappa, forged a unique brand of dark, freewheeling jazz-rock with often-surreal lyrics that quickly drew the attention of the country's authoritarian government.

In 1976, the group's members were jailed for "organized disturbance of the peace" following one of their concerts. The arrest and jailing led to the formation of a collective of

artists and intellectuals called Charter 77, whose leader was future Czech Republic President Václav Havel.

Although Brabanec said the band wrote but a single overtly political song, "100 Points," in its three-decade career, the Communist government considered the Plastic People a bad moral influence. They were forced to play underground shows for much of the '70s -- concerts that became a rite of passage for young revolutionaries and other dissident artists, according to Brabanec.

"I think [the upcoming tour] is complicated because we had originally stopped playing in 1981," Brabanec, 55, said of the group's tumultuous history. "We played a show [in 1981] that was at a private restaurant 100 kilometers from Prague, and the secret police burned the restaurant down a few months after."

In the fiery aftermath of that 1981 show, Brabanec said, he was driven to emigrate from Czechoslovakia to Canada, a move that effectively ended the band's activities.

After officially calling it quits in 1988, the group -- led by founder/bassist Milan Hlavsa and including drummer Jan Brabec, keyboardist Josef Janicek, viola player Jiri Kabes, guitarist Joe Karafiat and Brabanec -- came together again in 1997 at the insistence of longtime admirer and fellow dissident Havel, who requested they play a concert in celebration of the 20th anniversary of Charter 77.

An album of the Plastic People's performance at that show, *Plastic People of the Universe 1997*, will be released in the U.S. in March. It includes such songs as "**Dvacet**" (RealAudio excerpt), a Zappa-like chunk of hard blues-rock riffs featuring Brabanec's squealing alto sax lines and Brabec's muscular, jazzy drumming.

Beginning in March, a number of the group's albums will be available in the U.S. for the first time.

The reissues and U.S. tour owe their existence in large part to the New York-based nonprofit music organization Tamizdat, whose stated goal is to expose American music fans to the music and art of Central and Eastern Europe. It was Tamizdat that helped the Plastic People travel to New York last July for a gig at the Intel New York Music Festival, their first-ever U.S. performance.

"Part of it has to do with them," said Tamizdat's president, Heather Mount, of the group's until-now barely existent U.S. live presence. "There are six of them, and the decision-making process takes a long time. over long evenings with a lot of beer." After the

making process takes a long time, over long evenings that a lot of people. After the success of the Intel show, the band expressed renewed interest in coming over for a full slate of dates, she said.

"I think it's a bit hard for people [in the U.S.] to understand how convoluted an issue it is with them," Mount said of the group's political reputation. "While they're not trying to be expressly political, they've been forced to be by their position. It's a heated issue for them, too, because they were never trying to conquer the state."

Last September, at the request of Havel, Hlavsa joined Velvet Underground founder Lou Reed during a surprisingly caustic set of Reed's solo material and V.U. classics at a White House dinner hosted by President Clinton and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

"There was a time when I didn't expect that we would survive the Communist era without falling down," Brabanec said. "We always wanted to continue our music and our expression, but it's important to repeat that we didn't want to make a revolution; it just happened."

Plastic People of the Universe tour dates:

Feb. 23; Cambridge, Mass., Middle East

Feb. 24; Montreal, Quebec, Fourfounes Electriques

Feb. 25; Toronto, Ontario, El Mocambo

Feb. 26; Washington, D.C., Black Cat

Feb. 27-28; New York, N.Y., Knitting Factory

March 3; Oberlin, Ohio, Oberlin College, Dionysus

March 4; Cedar Rapids, Iowa, CSPA Hall

March 5; Chicago, Ill., Empty Bottle

March 6; Minneapolis, Minn., 400 Bar

March 9; Vancouver, British Columbia, Richard's on Richards

March 10; Seattle, Wash., Sit 'n' Spin

March 11; Portland, Ore., Satyricon

March 12; San Francisco, Calif., Bottom of the Hill

March 13; Los Angeles, Calif., Spaceland

March 14; San Diego, Calif., Casbah

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