

Bright sounds from punk survivors of communist oppression

BY DARRELL JÓNSSON
FOR THE POST

Founded during the 1980s in the former communist GDR, the Leipzig-based band Die Art fits naturally into the polished punk path set by the likes of PIL, the Fall and Joy Division. Their sound also taps the rock 'n' roll Teutonic spirit embraced by artists like David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Nick Cave.

Yet, despite the nearness of the band's East German hometown to the Czech border, there wasn't much musical cross-pollination between the neighboring CSSR and GDR states. As Die Art founder and lead singer H. Makarios Oley recalls, "In Leipzig there was a store for Czech culture, and there I bought some records by bands such as Blue Effect and Jazz Q. It was much more interesting than the official GDR youth music, though this was not the music for my punk heart."

Instead, Oley and his bandmates took an interest in the independent post-punk bands of England. Such a thirst, given the state-dominated music market at the time, was not easy to quench. But, as Oley explains, “We had our ways. At first, the radio — we could receive some West German radio stations. Later, in the ‘70s and ‘80s on state radio, there were a few special programs. Second, we had a black market for Western music. This sort of contra-band went for 100 or 120 GDR marks per recording, when a typical monthly income was about 600 marks. Third, we had private contacts. Our first bass player, Tilo, married a British girl and somehow emigrated to England. He used to send me thick parcels of records.”

In 1985 Oley co-founded the band Die Zucht, a band destined to bring the hard Teutonic-tinged punk of North England back to its linguistic cousins in Saxony. The band's name, combined with their song "Zucht und Ordnung" (Whips and Order), quickly raised the ire of local officials. Attempting to calm the authorities, the group took the German zoological synonym of "Zucht" (translated as either "breed" or "spices") and spun from it the English-innuendo Die Art.

Such word play failed to humor the authorities, as Oley recalls: "Die Art was on the way to bigger success, and so the GDR official label Amiga wanted us to record a 4-track EP. We submitted our lyrics to the censors. Everything was looking good until they read the words to our song 'I Wanna See the Wide Wide World.' Their reaction was, 'Not this song, it is calling for escape from the

Die Art

When: Thursday,
April 3, at 8

Where: Vagon
Tickets: 110 Kč,
available at the
door



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Suffering for art was more than just an expression for punks under communism.

GDR! Replace it!" "Wide Wide World" was one of our greatest hits, and our audience never could accept us making a record without this song."

It's a paradox that musicians in the Soviet bloc were usually forced to go underground by taking inspiration from left-leaning prog-rock and post-punk collectives in the West. The United Kingdom's Rough Trade, which launched artists like Scritti Politti and Gang of Four, was one such model. In Germany, there were the influential West German musical communes Amon Düül and Ton Steine Scherben. But personal politics didn't matter to the state.

“The socialist tendencies in the Western underground scene and the socialism in GDR or ČSSR were two very different

things,” explains Oley. “The underground or independent bands, labels and communities in the West had the chance to organize their work and live an alternative life. They also had opportunities for success. In the GDR, everything that did not conform to the official line was in danger of being banned. People were sent to prison and lost their jobs, and censorship was almighty. There is no comparison; one was within a dictatorship, and the other a democracy.”

Not everything about the West was appealing, according to Oley. "We didn't want to live in a commune," he says. The truth is they were too busy struggling to survive to be idealists. "We had no chance to get a contract with a record company. Our work was always a

struggle with the impossibilities, and DIY was it. If you wait for help, you are lost."

If the band's 2007 CD *Alles Was Dein Herz Begehrt* (All Your Heart Desires, on the Rough Trade label) is any indication, Die Art has survived the challenges of times past admirably. Their material continues to harbor the rough lyricism of the '80s Northern England punk that served as their original musical mirror. It has a dark, self-destructive streak, from the "no future" punk street call of Thatcher's England to their '80s East German counterparts responding "too much future." Yet as Prague audiences will soon hear, Die Art's sound remains strangely bright and far from extinction.

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