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Musicians Who Poked at the Iron Curtain

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)

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Guitars, keyboards and drums did not topple the [Berlin Wall](#). But for the young people who helped bring down Communist regimes across Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989, pop music was a profoundly subversive force, inspiration and vital tool of protest for challenging and undermining a totalitarian state stricter than any parent.



[Punk History](#)

Now middle aged, some of the musicians who played in ostracism during those last gray years of Communist rule gathered in New York over the weekend for the festival Rebel Waltz: Underground Music From Behind the Iron Curtain. Performing at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) in the West Village on Friday and Saturday, bands from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia commemorated the 20th anniversary of the wall's fall with cascades of sound in the grand tradition of the British and American pop that first motivated them.

Stylistically, the groups, some of which will be playing later this week in Chicago, Cleveland, Toronto and Washington, were all over the map. Dezerter, from Poland, is a classic punk band, playing short, loud, punchy songs with few breaks between them. Kontroll Csoport, from Hungary, showed strong art-rock leanings, with long suitelike pieces and elaborate, sometimes atonal arrangements featuring twin saxophones. Bez Ladu a Skladu turned out to be a Slovakian version of a British two-tone band, with the musicians even wearing the skinny ties and sunglasses that were the uniform of that movement.

The event was organized by government cultural agencies of the five countries represented, as well as the [New York Public Library](#). What united the groups then and now, as became clear during interviews and at a round-table discussion Saturday afternoon at the [New School](#), was their common anti-authoritarian stance. They saw themselves as rebels with a cause, punks whose lyrics railing against the status quo often carried a heavy cost, including surveillance and the danger of being labeled social parasites because their music could not be legally recorded, played or broadcast.

“There was a cultural opposition, a movement all over Eastern Europe, an underground network,” said Peter Sziami Müller, one of three lead singers of Kontroll Csoport, which was founded in 1980. “We all wanted to bring together those who belonged together, and to liberate the soul.” The reward, said the saxophonist Arpad Hajnoczy, was to be officially labeled an “ultra-right-wing group” and “always have a white Lada at the corner, watching and following us.”

At the time the bands were scarcely aware of what was going on in the West, much less aware of one another. With their access to Western pop music limited or sometimes entirely prohibited, aspiring musicians had only a spotty knowledge of styles and trends and were forced to draw inspiration largely from whatever happened to reach them in the form of scratchy, illegal samizdat tapes.

Michal Kascak, lead singer and keyboard player for Bez Ladu a Skladu, acknowledged that he hadn't heard the [Sex Pistols](#) until the 1990s. But he has vivid memories from the 1980s of listening to a fourth- or fifth-generation illegal cassette that had two songs each by the [Talking Heads](#) and the B-52's, which became his favorite bands. “On that cassette were ‘Pulled Up’ and ‘Psycho Killer’ by Talking Heads and ‘Planet Claire’ and ‘Rock Lobster’ from the B-52's,” he recalled “When my family went on vacation to Yugoslavia, which was more tolerant about such things, I was even able to buy an entire album by each group, which I smuggled across the border under the floorboards of my parents' car, with their help.”

But sometimes even potential allies in the struggle against totalitarian rule were not sure what to make of young musicians who were listening to Radio Free Europe and the [Voice of America](#) as much to hear snatches of the latest pop sounds as to get an uncensored version of the news. Members of Dezerter recall being invited to meet secretly around 1983 with leaders of Solidarity and the [Roman Catholic Church](#), which led the opposition to Communist rule in Poland.

“They couldn't understand what was happening” among young people, “which showed us that our way of thinking was very different from theirs, that we wanted something else,” said Krzysiek Grabowski, Dezerter's drummer and songwriter, who was 20 at the time. “We were doing a good job for them, working against the system, but our road was different.”

When change finally came late in 1989, it was swift and full of surprises. “In the course of a single day, Dec. 22, 1989, we went from being underground to mainstream,” said Adrian Plesca, lead singer of the new-wave Romanian band Timpuri Noi, referring to the day the dictatorship of [Nicolae Ceausescu](#) collapsed. “The same guys remained in charge of the state cultural apparatus,” Mr. Plesca said, so to prove their democratic bona fides in the new political context, “they asked, ‘Who do we have around here who is anti-Communist?’ which turned out to be us.”

But those euphoric new times, which is what Timpuri Noi means in Romanian, eventually faded. One of Timpuri Noi’s biggest post-1989 hits, “Victory,” contains these lyrics: “I ask myself if I see any change/ I’m asking you if there’s any change/ in the people around.” Dezerter continues to perform a 1987 song called “Swindle,” which rages that “A new swindle is prepared/ Again they want to get into your head.”

In a way, some of the musicians said, the situation has come full circle. As in the 1980s, they can no longer get their music played on the air, not because of government censors but because their countries are now so fully integrated into the global pop machine that stations prefer to play the same [Britney Spears](#) and [Beyoncé](#) songs and [MTV](#) videos as everyone else.

Yet the musicians and their fans continue to believe in the transformative power of music. At the New School event audience members from countries still under oppressive rule, like Iran and Cuba, asked the Eastern Europeans what they learned from the 1980s and what strategies they would recommend.

“I continue to say that 1989 was a miracle,” Mr. Kascak said. “I fully expected to have to live the rest of my life under Communism, unable to travel or play as a professional. I don’t care about the radio. I feel free now. If you were to have told me 20 years ago that in 2009 I would be playing in New York, I would have told you that you needed a psychiatrist.”