

Jazz in Soviet Estonia from 1944 to 1953

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Madam Custos, Mister Opponent, Ladies and Gentlemen! It is my greatest pleasure to open this occasion here: the examination of my dissertation on Estonian jazz history.¹

In 1950 the main editor of the Soviet music publication, Muzgiz Viktor Gordinsky, offered an “impressive” description of jazz performance in his article *Джаз и музыкальная культура буржуазного декаданса* (Jazz and the musical culture of bourgeois decadence):

The delicate silence is suddenly interrupted by some idiotic hammer blows. One, two, one-two-three-four...it is exactly like a piece of dirt falling into transparent and crystal-clear water. This fall is like a tigerish squeal, a whistle, a roar, an ululation, a bellow, a crackle. Sounding inhuman voices remind one the neigh of a horse, the copper grunting of a dying pig, a donkey's cry of distress or a frog's torch croak. This chaos of rabid sounds is subjected to rhythm, and when you listen to it for a minute or two, you start involuntarily to realise that the orchestra of madmen is playing. Those people went mad because of their sexual arousal led by the conductor, by a kind of human stallion with an enormous phallus.

The year before, in 1949, Estonian jazz historian Valter Ojakäär criticises in his article *Tänapäeva Ameerika džässimuusikast* (On present day American jazz music) the jazz piece of Slim Galliard's *The Avocado Seed Soup Symphony*:

This was a ten minutes musical bacchanal which consisted of the senseless babbling of three singers, accompanied by piano, guitar and bass. The audiences were lured by musicians who are under the influence of a drug made of the marijuana-plant. What should one think of music that has titles like 'Mop, Mop', 'Blop, Bah', 'Pom Pom', 'Grip an axe, Max', 'Don't beat your wife with a spade?'

More than 60 years later, in 2012, a member of the Estonian group called the Swing Club Uno Loop recalls in his interview the jazz scene of the late 1940s and early 1950s as follows:

We were rehearsing literally under ground – SC was an underground organization. Fortunately, the control was not that intense, and we did not face any power executives. The head of the Sakala Culture House, Fred Raudberg, supported our activi-

¹ Lectio praecursoria. PhD Heli Reimann defended publically her doctoral dissertation *Jazz in Soviet Estonia from 1944 to 1953: meanings, spaces and paradoxes* at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Helsinki on 28 November, 2015. Professor Tony Whyton acted as the opponent and Professor Pirkko Moisala as the custos. The dissertation is electronically published and can be found at <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/157762>.

ties. Although he was communist and knew that we played jazz during our rehearsals, he protected us and took care to keep our activity secret. And he was sincere. He was red on the outside, but white on the inside – ‘reddish’ was how we called him those times.

These examples perfectly illustrate the situation of Estonian jazz in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On the one hand, Soviet power strove to eradicate jazz since the music represented unacceptable Western ideology. And the power’s aspirations succeeded indeed: between 1950 and 1953 jazz disappeared from public musical arenas and media. But the disappearance of the music from public spheres did not mean that jazz disappeared entirely. Its “doodle-doo” still sounded in dance halls, and musicians played and discussed it in private circles. This situation can be referred to as a Soviet paradox, which in the spirit of Aleksei Yurchak means the coexistence of contradictory entities: jazz concurrently both existed and non-existed.

In the broadest sense, my dissertation focuses on the meaning of jazz in the late Stalinist Estonia. I see the meaning not as something concrete, final and briefly-defined, but rather fluid and open-ended, forming in the confluence of conflicting influences, loosely analogous to how physicists might describe nuclear reactions through the processes of fusion and fission. And like with living organisms, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, jazz’s final meaning can be greater than and something different from the single elements that comprise it. The meaning, as I construct it, took shape in different cultural spaces as an interaction between and within musicians, state power and jazz culture.

Translation plays a crucial role in meaning transmission. As long as a variety of cultures continue to interact, translation will help to make us understandable to one another. For instance, here in Finland, many would consider a spirited and intense interruption of another’s talking impolite. But in another cultural context, such an interruption might instead be considered a polite gesture of respect to speaker. We must be cognizant of these differences in order not to “overshoot the mark.” Translating cultures is even more important nowadays, with masses of people crossing “Western” geographical and cultural borders and thus forcing us to redefine our values and beliefs.

Alternatively, taking examples from my study, one might ask whether an analyst can interpret a cultural or artistic phenomenon that functions under the conditions of a command economy, such as jazz in the Soviet Union, in the same way as a phenomenon operating under the conditions of a market economy. Probably not. Another example to illustrate these cultural differences is the meaning of bebop in the American and Estonian contexts. The Western history of jazz considers the late 1940s a bebop era, whereas contemporary Estonians overwhelmingly preferred swing at that time. In contrast to American views, which considered bebop an antidote to swing and American capitalist ideology, Heldur Karmo, writing in the Estonian almanac “Swing Club”, saw bebop as the purest representation of American capitalist values and ideology. To understand this disparity of views, we need translations.

To summarise, I support the idea of Peter Burke, who talks about cultural translation as an extremely useful concept, and draw attention to the effort and skill, as well as to the difficult decisions involved in explaining cultures. I would argue that despite the quarter-century distance from the collapse of the Soviet regime, the understanding of the particularities of the Soviet era is not still adequate enough. Focus of the researches has been on political history, state leaders, policies and structures, deportations and oppressions. The arts and the everyday life of the ordinary people are unfortunately issues of relatively low interest. Soviet era is controversial period which tends to need the dialogic interaction with established scholarly traditions in order to translate it for a broader readership and expand its position as an academic subject. This latter view explains my deep interest in theorisation.

In the personal statement part of the dissertation, I introduced the term *in-betweenness*, which French historian Pierre Yves Saunier refers to as an approach for those scholars “whose social and cultural background, personal and professional trajectories, lifestyles and activities develop ‘in-between’ nations, continents and personal and professional trajectories.” This concept most appropriately characterises my subject position. It lurks behind the choices I made during the research process.

Divisions in my professional career between research, pedagogy and music making, including my experiences of living in different societies, as well as my holistic worldview, have prevented me from fully identifying with a particular professional community, society, geographical territory or belief group. This in-betweenness characterises not only my path, but is also particular to my research agenda. While searching for meaning, I combine knowledge from a number of research traditions such as Soviet studies, jazz studies and Estonian history studies. At the same time, the study tries to transcend the limitations of particular disciplines and to create new features. Perhaps this is something particular to what is currently called the *trans era*, which has seen the rise of the concepts such as transnationalism, transdisciplinarity, transculturalism, transhumanism and transpersonalism?

I challenge Soviet studies models by advancing the binary models common to Soviet scholars, who view Soviet power and individuals as oppositional, and individuals as subjected to state power and its strategies. Instead, I propose a framework highlighting the interactions between individuals, state power and jazz culture. In the context of jazz studies, my example of Estonian jazz tends to reconstruct the American-centred jazz-as-a-tradition paradigm and to create its own web of cultural and historical meanings. However, as Estonian writer and semiotician Valdur Mikita once said, the role of small cultures is to rethink larger cultures. Small cultures embody the element of the alien, which helps to overcome the petrified paradigms of large cultures and to see things from new angles.

In Finland, jazz has a relatively low profile as a scholarly subject compared to other musical styles – only eight researchers have selected jazz as the subject of their doctoral theses. While the tendency of Finnish jazz researchers

has been to focus on jazz as a musical phenomenon, my study challenges this approach by discussing jazz as a culture. Paradoxically, the Estonian aspect is the least explicitly represented in my study. I include it mostly implicitly as my desire to transcend the canon of nationalising history or, in other words, to decentralise the national aspect in history writing.

The aspect which is definitely not in-between is my gender. Those who have typically played jazz and written about it are and were male. The masculine nature of jazz reminds me of a saying by famous big band leader Maria Schneider, who claims that to be recognised in this male-centered world of jazz, women must be twice as good as the men are. Here I agree with jazz scholar Ingrid Monson, according to whom the jazz world has a very long way to go in its acceptance of women and alternative sexualities. In the world of jazz research, women are an absolute minority.

For instance, according to statistics from the acknowledged, international jazz conference *Rhythm Changes III* (in 2014), approximately one quarter of its participants were women. I happened to be the only female participant in the Nordic jazz conferences in 2009 and 2015. I never experienced discomfort as a jazz researcher – as a woman apparently doing “male things.” But I indeed encountered disdain stepping over the threshold of a man’s world by becoming the first woman to play professionally a gender-inappropriate instrument – the saxophone. In the late 1980s Estonia, the only appropriate wind instrument for women was the flute. Now, years later, I realised that those reactions were not personal but structured by a history and culture that were beyond any individual’s control.

The only time I ever felt disadvantaged because of this in-betweenness was while seeking professional advice in Estonia. Unfortunately, the search yielded no results. It however did lead me to the rhetorical conclusion that my study contains too little music for Estonian musicologists: for cultural studies, it seemed to be too popular and to feature too much music, and for historians, it contains too little Estonianness and not enough horror, violence and suffering. Though uttered half-jokingly, the statement underscores some tendencies in Estonian humanities. First one is the relative rigidity of borders between the disciplines. Another is the lack of interest in popular music and culture.

To my knowledge, the two doctoral dissertations on popular music completed thus far are Tiit Lauk’s study of early jazz in Estonia and Triin Vallaste’s study of hip-hop in the post-Soviet Estonia. I have no authority to identify the reason for the dearth of popular music studies in Estonia, but I might dare to suggest that perhaps the weak interest among researchers stems from the strong connectedness of the Estonian cultural identity to high culture and to folk traditions. Western popular culture is still typically perceived in a culturally elitist manner as an Otherness or alien, as something menacing to high culture. Again, this argument found some support in a recent Estonian cultural forum, where popular culture evoked little interest.

The keywords of my study – Soviet, post-WWII and memory – have compelled me to transcend the borders of the academic world and to draw

a parallel with current broader cultural trends. Take, for instance, Svetlana Alexievich, recent winner of the Nobel prize in literature, whose books deal with historical crises, including the post-WWII Soviet Union through peoples' memories, or Finnish writer Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge*, which conveys the complexities and contradictions of the post-war Estonia, or the movie *1944*, an Oscar nominee for the best foreign film, made in cooperation with Estonian and Finnish filmmakers. In addition, the extensive exploration of Soviet themes could be seen in the exposition at the Venice art biennale (including the Estonian exhibition on homosexuality in Soviet society, "Not suitable for work: A chairman's tale", by Jaanus Samma). Yet what all those representations have in common is their focus on crisis and human suffering.

In my search for reasons why representations of human tragedy, conflicts and crisis tend to dominate in the works of creative people, I stumbled upon an statement by Arthur Schopenhauer, which says that "we feel pain, but not its absence; we feel concern, but not its absence; we feel fear, but not reassurance." Maybe it is a part of human nature to focus on the negative and not to appreciate the positive? In any case, my study focuses not on the horror and violence of the Soviet power but instead on the musicians' fanatical involvement with jazz during a time of high political intolerance towards the music. I encourage readers to interpret the musicians' involvement symbolically, as the victory of creativity, the human need for self-actualisation and music over the Soviet power. The power of music is especially important to remember in the context of today's instability and insecurity.

I would like to finish by turning to the musicians – the men whose personal memories were of crucial importance in formation of my narrative. My meetings with those old men in their mid-80s, so full of desire to convey their memories, were the most touching moments of the research process. Listening for long hours to their recollections convinced me of their fanaticism, enthusiasm and dedication. Their sense of humour helped them to cope, for instance, with the absurdity where the piece *The Night in a Big City*, obviously referring to New York City, remained in the programme after replacing it with the politically more acceptable title *Night in the Negro Village*. Their inventiveness compensated for the paucity in everyday Soviet life. I apply Soviet scholar Timothy Johnston's term *get-by* to refer to the musicians' everyday strategies for self-actualisation. These strategies include touring, musical learning and listening, ritualising, humour, inventiveness, curiosity, dedication and intellectualising jazz.

To finish with an optimistic note, let me give the stage over to musicians who perform the signature tune of the group Mickey's – an Estoniannised version of Max C. Freedman's *Heartbreaker*², which ends with the following positive message:

The gates of the new
Bright happiness are open
Our future can be seen there

FT Heli Reimann (hereli@hot.ee) on jazztutkija ja -muusikko. Vuodesta 2016 alkaen hän työskentelee Koneen säätöön apurahalla postdoc-tutkijana.

² This auditory example is available at <http://arhiiv.err.ee/vaata/papa-valter-pajatab-papa-valter-pajatab-mickey-s>.