

Druhá Tráva EPK

Articles

Bob Dylan, Obama And A Moment In Prague

by *DON GONYEA*

NPR audio story and transcript: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103008447>

Cedar Rapids, IA Concert Review

by *Diana Nollen/ SourceMedia Group*

CEDAR RAPIDS – Druha Trava translates to “second grass,” which seems akin to “new growth,” which seems to embody the Czech bluegrass band’s sound.

This is bluegrass by way of rock, country, gospel, folk and Celtic influences. And it’s fantastic.

The folks at Legion Arts have proven they know a good thing when they hear it, and Wednesday night’s concert (10/29/2011) at CSPS marks at least the 10th time they’ve brought Druha Trava to the Corridor. I’m ashamed to say it’s the first time I’ve seen the band in action, but I certainly hope it won’t be the last.

A small but wildly enthusiastic crowd of 85 in the renovated Czech social hall basked in the music of the band that opened for President Obama’s 2009 speech in Prague’s main square.

It’s easy to see why the seasoned ensemble has toured the United States almost annually during its 20-year history. Its music is firmly rooted in American traditions.

Dubbed “Czechgrass,” the sonic fusion blends the band’s original songs with the sounds of Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Cash, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Bill Monroe. Except under the deft fingers and vocals of Druha Trava, the songs don’t sound anything like Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Cash, CCR and Bill Monroe. They sound completely new.

Dylan’s “One More Cup of Coffee” becomes an even more mysterious, sensual ballad. The Stones’ “Wild Horses” takes on an easy, loping cowboy gait under Lubos Novotny’s haunting dobro slides and Lubos Malina’s banjo picking. “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” gathers no moss with the band’s kicky bluegrass and stunning string work on dobro and acoustic guitars, acoustic bass, mandolin and banjo.

The tone changes entirely when Malina trades his banjo for low whistle and penny whistle to add a Celtic flair to the music. The gospel favorite, “Peace in the Valley,” becomes utterly serene with a quiet rhythm gently supporting the gorgeous three-part vocal harmony that really let the lyrics jump out and shine.

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The vocals retain their gritty urgency in any genre, from lead singer and mandolin player Robert Kreštan. He and Malina have been performing together for nearly 30 years, leaving their previous band, Poutnici, to form Druha Trava in 1991.

Novotny has been along for the ride since the beginning, as well, and it shows, in the tight way the band plays and the loose way they interact. Emil Formanek joined in on guitar in 1984. Award-winning jazz bass player Tomas Liska is the newcomer, coming onboard in 2010.

The intimate setting of CSPA is the perfect place to witness the sheer pleasure of seeing the five bandmates play off each other as they play their music. The sound is equally captivating whether in Czech or English or purely instrumental. The band's CDs, including the newly released English-language collection, "Shuttle to Bethlem," went flying off the tables at intermission and after the two-hour concert.

This is one international band that makes you feel completely at home.

Monday Music: Traveling the "Czechgrass" Trail

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

I've just spent two days in a Prague studio helping record the vocal tracks for a new CD by the Czech country/bluegrass/fusion group Druha Trava. Founded 20 years ago, DT has brought out more than a dozen albums, including several in English. The new CD is the first that will primarily feature English-language versions of singer-songwriter Robert Kreštan's distinctive original songs. I made the translations, and the studio session was the culmination of a collaborative project that had taken more than five years to come to fruition.

Most people know me for my writing and other work on Jewish issues, but for much of the past decade I've also been exploring Europe's "imaginary Wild West," spending time at Wild West theme parks, swinging door saloons, and American-style country music events.

I first heard Druha Trava — the name means "Second Grass" — back in 2004, when I was bouncing around the Czech Republic, following the summer bluegrass festival circuit. I don't speak Czech, but the group has been my favorite band ever since.

The flourishing Czech bluegrass scene dates back decades and has its roots in the so-called Tramp Movement, a Czech outdoors and music subculture that originated after World War I and embraced American-style campfire singing and the romance of the West.

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But Druha Trava uses American roots music as just a starting point for its own synthesis of bluegrass, rock, country music, folk and even classical motifs. American banjo great Tony Trischka, who has toured with DT, was one of the first to call the sound “Czechgrass.”

All the musicians are virtuosos. But it’s Krestan’s songs and raw, gritty vocals that make DT’s music particularly compelling. American reviewer David Royko once said his voice embodied the “power and beauty of a thick slice of unvarnished oak.”

Krestan is an iconic performance figure, famous among Czech fans for his poetic and often enigmatic lyrics. He has also rendered many English songs into Czech — DTs’s 2007 CD “Dylanovky” features Czech versions of Bob Dylan songs. Aside from music he is the Czech translator of books by Norman Mailer and other American writers.

I started translating Krestan’s songs into English in 2006. My first goal was basic: I loved the Czech originals, but I wanted to know what they meant. As I started working, though, it seemed much more logical — and in fact, even easier — to put them in a rhyming form that could be sung. The process was surprisingly straightforward.

A young student in Prague, David Kraus, supplied me with word-for-word equivalents. David’s father Tomas is an old friend, the secretary of the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities, but he also knows a lot about the Czech country music scene. In Communist times Tomas’s late brother produced, wrote and translated songs for several key Czech tramp and country-style groups.

I took the words that David gave me, compared them to the rhythm of the original Czech lyrics, and listened over and over to the original songs in order to capture their meaning and rhyme structure as well as to fit them to the melodies.

Czech is a more bristly language than English, with quite different sounds and cadences, and Krestan uses words for their tonality as well as meaning. But remarkably, my lyrics got to a point where they seemed to click into place. Later, Krestan and I spent a couple of sessions together tweaking the English to improve both nuance and “singability.”

In the studio, as Krestan sang into the microphone, I stood in the sound booth with DT’s banjo player Lubos Malina, who is co-producing the CD with Nashville-based Steve Walsh. Five years on, it was the first time I heard the songs sung in their final form. (Walsh oversaw the recording of the instrumentals in Nashville last spring.) They sounded, well, right. I focused on recording levels and intonation, but I couldn’t keep a goofy smile off my face. If all goes as planned the CD, called “Shuttle to Bethlehem” will be out in September. Druha Trava begins a tour of the US on October 13 in Park Rapids, Minnesota.