

Name: Grant Garstka

Contact: grantjgar@gmail.com

Rockin' in the Post-Socialist World

On a steamy summer night in the middle of Tennessee, I was one of roughly 80,000 people standing in a moonlit field as Neil Young and Crazy Horse jammed out as the headlining act of the first night of a three-day music festival in June 2003. Bonnaroo, the – at the time – burgeoning music festival that hosted the bands, albeit not the most well known bands, throughout North America created the perfect setting for music and unrestricted musical exploration. Sure, it is guilty of trying to re-create three days of peace, love and happiness of the hippie days of Woodstock. However, there is one major difference between Bonnaroo and Woodstock - Bonnaroo worked! Remember that the original Woodstock was really three days of chaos with little to no food and water and Woodstock 1999 literally went up in flames. During the early years of this festival most of America never even knew that such a large music festival was taking place. If plans for Bonnaroo were more present in the public realm, fears of another Woodstock '99 or of unruly sex, drugs and rock n' roll surely would have shot down the plans for such a festival. Yet, Bonnaroo achieved three days of peace, love and harmony without any major problems and sold out almost all by word of mouth.

Maybe the venue of a farm in Tennessee created an ideal city of sorts or maybe the festival was a living symbol American rock music in a free world. However, when Neil Young busted into the reverb heavy chords and stepped up to the microphone to sing, as only Neil Young can, the lines to *Rockin' in the Free World*, he was singing to more than just those people in that field. His lyrics are very much a commentary of American ignorance of societal warning signs, but his song also offers a point of reflection on how we might be able to do something about it and start to take care of each other. Somehow sound waves carried Young's message to places further away, places where rockin' in the free world was taking on

new meanings in an ever-changing world. While I stood in that field with 80,000 other people I knew exactly what it meant for that moment in time, yet for people elsewhere in the world rockin' in the free world means different things and works in different ways.

Historically, in Central and Eastern Europe, rockin' was not always an option or a choice available for people in this region. However, with the collapse of the Communist system starting 1989, almost overnight, the young generations of this region of the world invented and discovered ways to keep on rockin', which in some ways are quite different from the Americana style of rockin', yet, aspects of it are actually quite similar and aid in forming a global music culture. My travels through the old Soviet Bloc during that same summer I saw Neil Young and Crazy Horse play in Tennessee made me realize that we all 'rock,' but we 'rock' in our own ways.

Love Parade

In July of 2003, I worked as a language instructor at a camp in Western Poland. A few of my colleagues and myself used the opportunity of a free weekend to escape the small Polish city and confines of the camp to venture to Berlin, the old gateway city between east and west. This was not just a weekend of sightseeing and touring; rather we headed to the Berlin techno music festival - Love Parade. Arriving at the train station in Gorzow Wilkopolski, Poland early in the morning on the day of Love Parade we soon realized that this event was more than just an event for the city of Berlin, but it was an event for much of the youth of the old Eastern Bloc. We stood on the platform with many Gorzow youth, which was somewhat expected given the fact we were only a few hours from Berlin. However, the true realization came when our train pulled into the station.

If there ever was a party train, this was it. The first thing one notices when the Love Parade party train pulls into the station is the sound of whistles, a sound that would haunt me for the next 24 hours. Not the whistle of the train nor of the conductors on the platform sending signals to the engineer, but hundreds of whistles from inside of the train cars. It seems that part of the Love Parade culture and style of 'rock' requires everyone to blow into a small metal whistle whenever they felt the urge. It doesn't have to go along with the beat of music or agree with the melody of others blowing their whistles. It appears that there is simply one rule: If you feeling like blowing, for whatever reason, you simply insert

and blow until you feel like it is no longer necessary to blow the whistle. For the duration of my short-lived stay in Berlin for Love Parade, there was no escape from the non-stop tweet-tweet of the thousands of whistles. As much as the repetitive shrill got on my nerves and polluted the sound of the music at the festival, I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that on this day I feel slightly left out because I did not have my own whistle to blow.

The parade itself was unlike any other musical event I have ever attended. Semi-trucks pulled flatbeds filled with sound equipment, semi-nude to nude dancers and a different world class DJ on each truck – techno, house, drum n’ bass, whatever you like, they had it. The trucks circulate slowly around the different avenues in Tiergarten Park in the middle of Berlin in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate, the main symbol of east and west, with heart of the event being Victory Column. The result: 80,000+ people dancing together. When a musical truck goes by and you like what the DJ is playing, you can dance along with the truck. If you don’t like that particular DJ’s style, shortly a new truck carrying a new DJ will come your way from the other direction. Here you have the choice to continue on with this DJ or, once again, wait to see what the DJ on the next truck is putting out over the airwaves.

Or, if you chose, you could experience the festival from above. It’s a unique skill that I find only Central and Eastern Europeans really have, but if there is something to climb, be it a tree, a street pole or a port-a-potty, one will find someone high upon it pumping their fist in the air to the beat of the music and hanging on with the other. The most skilled climbers can turn these places into dance platforms, yes, even the top of a lamppost can be balanced upon – it must provide a good vantage point for the road ahead.

At the parade, one was free to be whoever they wanted to be; in much the same way one could blow the whistle whenever they felt obligated. The most common forms of self-expression are brightly colored fuzzy knee-high boots with not much else on. Others might dye their hair. Or there is the less eccentric, but more abundant form of identity via your country’s flag – as the day went on the space above everyone’s head filled with Polish, Czech, Russian and Slovak flags, but only to celebrate national identity, not to fight over it. In some respects, while the dress, styles and culture of Love Parade are completely unique, at the same time, they are not unlike the tie-die t-shirts, scantily dressed or topless neo-hippies waving flags in the fields of Bonnaroo, where people come to dance to music. And when I

think about, the endless musical jams of the bands at Bonnaroo are not unlike the electronic stories told by Love Parade DJs.

The people of Love Parade lived their generations new freedoms to travel, to dress how they pleased, to blow whistles and to *rock!* While it may be only be a one-day festival in a far off city, most of these people traveled back to places of high unemployment, uncertain futures, towns marked by depressing socialist-era bloc apartments and towns of winners and losers of the new capitalist game. Places without the joys and freedoms experienced in the streets of Berlin during Love Parade. However, the parade goers do not return home empty handed. They learn through experience of what it means to be able to freely express oneself and the coming together of cultures that help foster democracy and dialogue in the world. It teaches parade goers that whether German, Pole, Dutch or Yugo-Slav, maybe, just maybe, there is something similar in all of us and that we can all spend one day in the streets dancing. These lessons return home to their respective towns and cities and they apply them as they live through these years of transition. If you go to a dance club anywhere in Eastern Europe, there is a good chance you will even hear the blow of whistle coming from the dance floor, just one of the lessons learned from Love Parade.

Rock Nights

At the end of my summer in Poland I continued my travels in Eastern Europe and visited an old college roommate in Lithuania. He provided me the unique experience of attending a Lithuanian music festival – Roko Naktys or Rock Nights. It was much in the style of Bonnaroo – camping in a field for a couple of days with several bands playing each day. However, while attendance of both Bonnaroo and Love Parade tallied in the tens of thousands, less than 2,000 people attended the Rock Nights festival. I am also pretty sure I was the only American and native English speaker at this festival.

Despite the small numbers, it is important to understand that Lithuania is a small country with most of the population residing in one of the country's three cities. Leaving the city of Kaunas, on our way to the festival, the on ramps of the highway were filled young people attempting to hitch-hike a ride to the festival because most families do not have a car (or one to spare for a multi-day music festival and public transport usually does not go to destinations in the middle of the woods). But again, this was the new generation of youth

exploring an era different from the one that preceded them. They to were learning how to navigate and live in a rapidly changing free world. And they were free to move, there was not internal passport system making them stay put and the lack of a car was not going to stop them from moving.

In addition, while Bonnaroo was a large event that received very little attention, Rock Nights was a symbol of a new Lithuania in a new era, much as Love Parade is an expression of freedom since 1989. While only a few thousand people were in attendance, the second night of the event, which was headlined by Lithuania's biggest band – an AC/DC cover band, Lithuanian national TV televised the event across the whole country. It was a national event. It didn't matter who or how many people were there, just that people were there and rockin' at their own free will. It didn't matter that the main band was playing lame heavy metal covers, but that they were Lithuanian playing whatever style of music they wanted and no one was going to stop them. This was the mark of a new Lithuania. Perhaps it wasn't until I was standing in this small crowd with an AC/DC cover band thrashing away at their guitars on Lithuanian national television that I realized that political, economic and cultural transition in the post-soviet world happens in many ways and people are still figuring out how it works. Maybe Rock Nights with an AC/DC cover band was just a test or practice of what a music festival should be or maybe it was just what they wanted – as the freedom to play AC/DC, Deep Purple and Pantera did not always exist for the people of Lithuania. It was at Rock Nights, somewhere in the middle of Lithuania, with a handful of newly made friends that I truly got a glimpse of what it meant *to keep on rockin' in the free world.*