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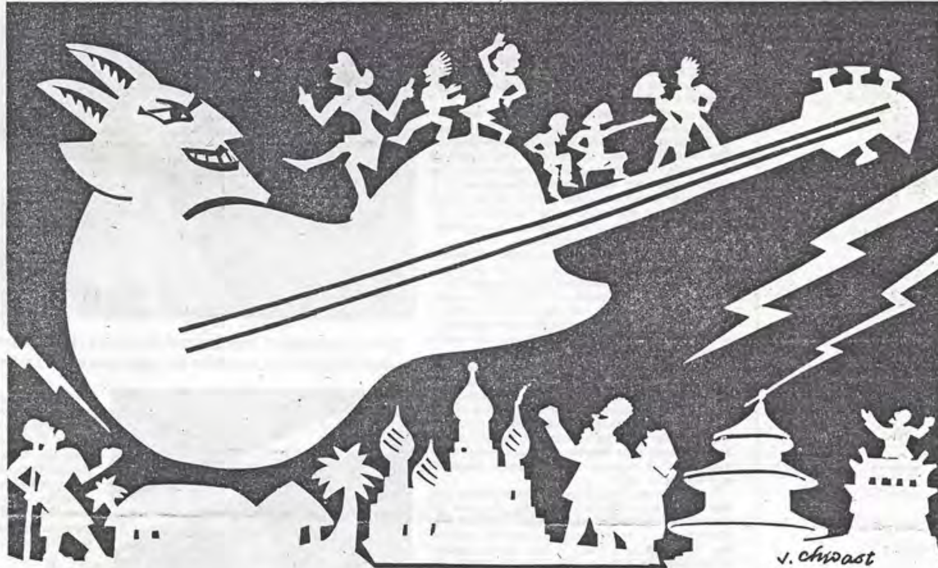

Rock And Control

From Pretoria to Prague, pop challenges the state's power to channel people's passions.

By Robert Pattison

TWO YEARS AGO Chinese teenagers were twisting the night away to the beat of "Flashdance." Twelve thousand fans packed Peking's Workers' Gymnasium to hear the British group Wham! and — better late than never — Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" became a hit record in China's capital city.

China's case of the boogie-woogie flu was carefully tended by the culture-doctors of the ruling Communist Party. In fact, the party itself imported *yaogunyue*, or "shake-roll music," as part of its open-door policy of assimilating western influences.

The Chinese Ministry of Culture sponsored a touring reggae band, and the state-controlled television network broadcast disco lessons for the masses. "What's wrong with rock 'n' roll?" asked the party's general secretary, Hu Yaobang, the champion of liberalization. "I'd learn how to dance rock 'n' roll myself if I wasn't so old."

Comrade Hu has since learned what's wrong with rock 'n' roll, and despite his age he will now have plenty of time for disco lessons. Conservatives in the party ousted him from his leadership job in January. By Chinese standards his reforms had run amok. In the streets of Shanghai and Peking, young party members were doing another western-style dance, protesting for more freedom of expression. It's unlikely any rock group will be booked for a return engagement in China any time soon.

Official attitudes toward popular music are a barometer of the political climate in many of the world's countries. Russia's Nikita Khrushchev complained that jazz made him feel like he had gas on the stomach, but his government, relatively liberal by Stalinist standards, was tolerant of the Russian infatuation with western pop music. Like Comrade Hu, Khrushchev wound up out of a job.

His more conservative successors in the Kremlin took a harder line against jazz and then rock.

They died in office. Now comes Mikhail Gorbachev, and suddenly rock bands are flourishing in a new era of Soviet liberalization. The party even sponsored a "We Are the World"-style rock festival to raise money for the victims of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, and in the permissive atmosphere of the

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Rock and Control: How Pop Challenges Tyranny

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new regime, Soviet rockers have found their way onto MTV.

If Gorbachev is any luckier than comrades Hu and Khrushchev, he will be the exception. The modern totalitarian state more often than not takes a firm line on pop music, and even when it loosens the reins, its tolerance is not a gift but a loan to be recalled as soon as the political winds shift.

This suppression of western pop music by different totalitarian regimes may be nothing more than a measure of their hostility to foreign influences. This is certainly the case in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary Iran, where rock and jazz are repressed as musical incarnations of the Great Satan.

But on closer inspection, xenophobia seems to play a minor role in government censorship of music. Whenever a leader of the Soviet Union dies, the Red Army Band plays Chopin's Funeral March as he is carried to his niche in the Kremlin wall — the modern czars are laid to rest to the strains of a thoroughly decadent Polish patriot. If this irony doesn't bother the members of the Politburo, it seems unlikely they object to jazz or rock merely because it's American or bourgeois.

When they squelch pop music, governments are not protesting its foreignness — in fact the state-controlled British media have a long history of censoring native English rock, and the Clash protested that the best British rock could only be heard on "pirate satellite." Totalitarian governments object to pop music because it interferes with the state's prerogative to organize its citizens.

The state tries to give its citizens one sense of identity, while pop music gives them another. The state uses radio, TV and the electronic media to infuse its bureaucracies and armies with a sense of natiónal purpose. Along comes pop music, using the same technologies to suggest to the same citizens that they're part of a global marketplace that supersedes the narrow limits of any particular state.

The children of the Russian *nomenklatura* and the workers on Mazda's assembly line are all singing along to the latest Janet Jackson hit. Electricity and its technologies from the radio to the Walkman have made a new global popular music possible. But no absolutist state wants its subjects to be citizens of the world. It wants to define citizenship in its own national terms.

In Czechoslovakia, the government briefly allowed an organization called the Jazz Section to publish a newsletter for pop aficionados. The publication soon became the country's leading conduit for foreign trends and international influences. The state then outlawed the Jazz Section, and in Prague last week, five of its leaders were convicted of defying government restrictions. Pop music challenges the totalitarian state's privilege of assigning its citizens their national identity.

When they crack down on electronically disseminated pop, totalitarian regimes usually try to encourage a taste for native folk music as a substitute. The white government of South Africa, for instance, promotes a musical diet of native tribal music for the black majority.

This is pure irony. The same forces that have created the totalitarian state have destroyed folk music. There are few isolated cultures left still churning out uncontaminated native folk melodies, and where such cultures do exist, totalitarian regimes seek to absorb them into a more manageable whole — witness the Soviets' treatment of the native culture of Kazakhstan or the Chinese policy toward the indigenous culture of Tibet.

And the folk no longer think of themselves exclusively as tribes. The black freedom movement in South Africa encourages its supporters to listen to American pop instead of tribal music as a means of defying the state's attempt to impose an identity on them and of asserting their fellowship with the rest of the world.

Paul Simon learned the politics of pop and folk the hard way. His Grammy-winning "Graceland" album is a tribute to the tribal music of South Africa, but many blacks condemn the record for lending support to the white regime's policy of crushing the freedom movement by foisting antiquated tribal identities on them. These freedom fighters don't want to be thought of as the musically gifted folk of "Graceland" but as co-equal citizens in the modern world of pop and technology.

But the lie that electronically generated music gives to the totalitarian illusion of omnipotence represents only half the threat rock or jazz poses to an absolutist regime.

Stingray Productions

Soviet underground rock artists in Moscow's Red Square with Joanna Stingray (third from left), an American who smuggled out tapes for the 1986 album 'Red Wave.'

Reuter Photo

A fan at the Wham! concert in Peking: There was plenty wrong with rock 'n' roll.

If the Voice of America were breaching the Soviet airwaves with the operas of the American composer Samuel Barber, the commissars could safely turn off their jamming devices. The insidious threat of rock or jazz is not only its electronic ubiquity but its appeal to the masses' unrefined passions.

Pop music is the object of censorship precisely because it's popular. Rock or jazz competes with the state in its attempt to shape the emotional life of its citizens.

Twenty-four centuries ago, Plato wrote the Look on how to run a totalitarian state. In "The Laws,"

'It puts the lie to the state's illusion of omnipotence.'

he explained why the governors of such a system should make the control of music a top state priority. Music, Plato argued, is the universal language of the passions. The young respond to its rhythms without any training.

The state ought to make use of this fact by using music as the primary tool of education. The wise rulers of the state have an obligation to encourage the music that cultivates reverence for law, and to censor the music that indulges the debasing animal impulses.

In some of the more frightening film footage from Nazi Germany, the Hitler Youth quick-time through the Bavarian Alps lustily chanting hymns to the Fatherland. Could such health and discipline have been possible for a generation randomly exposed to the debilitating influence of Louis Armstrong or Benny Goodman?

To one degree or another, every totalitarian state falls back on Plato's logic. Rock and jazz threaten the state's monopoly on the education of the citizen from the inside out.

In our own country, some rather feeble attempts have been made recently to control popular music. In 1985, Democratic Sen. Albert Gore of Tennessee convened a session of a congressional subcommittee to investigate the baleful influence of the lyrics of rock artists such as Twisted Sister and Prince.

Meanwhile, the senator's wife, Tipper, helped to found the Parents Music Resource Center, a pressure group that has lobbied with mixed success to get the recording industry to put warning labels on albums like "Peace Sells" by the Brooklyn trash metal band Megadeth or "Blah Blah Blah" by Iggy Pop.

The appearance in America of a type of musical censorship we usually associate with totalitarian regimes is both trivial and sad. It is trivial because the attack on rock lyrics is not really like the repression practiced by the governments of Russia or China.

In those countries, the access of whole forms of musical expression to airwaves and concert halls is systematically controlled.

The Gores have only attacked a handful of lyrics. They and their committees have had no discernible effect on America's insatiable appetite for rock of all kinds, nor can they hope to have any unless they repeal the First Amendment.

But the Gores' campaign is more sad than bad. Sad because in attacking rock they demean what may be the best instrument of American foreign policy.

America is supposed to hold out the promise of freedom for people to fashion their own inner lives. Pop music represents this freedom for millions around the world.

We're supposed to champion the free world markets unrestricted by despotic rulers or narrow nationalism.

The global audience of pop is a partial realization of this ideal world.

Instead of fussing about the ambiguities in the lyrics of Prince, the Gores ought to support an appropriation to build a transmitter big enough to beam jazz and rock to Pretoria, Moscow and Peking.

The commissars won't like it, but the people will understand.