

1-1-2017

Czech Bluegrass Media, An Overview

Lee Bidgood

East Tennessee State University, bidgood@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#)

Citation Information

Bidgood, Lee. 2017. Czech Bluegrass Media, An Overview. *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. Vol.23(2). 281-289. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.23.2.0281>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Czech Bluegrass Media, An Overview

Copyright Statement

Published as "Czech Bluegrass Media, An Overview." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 23 (2). © 2017 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

Annotated Media

Czech Bluegrass Media, An Overview

Note: This is not an exhaustive discography of Czech bluegrass, but rather a listing of material relevant to the people, sounds, and stories in this volume. For a wider (and updated) list of bands, festivals, and concerts, see the websites listed at the end of this section.

Audio

Banjo Romantika Soundtrack. Produced by Lee Bidgood, 2016. Compact disc.

The material in this collection all relates to the documentary film *Banjo Romantika*; there are musical performances from the film and a field recording of a jam, as well as studio-produced tracks from musicians featured in the film, such as Reliéf, Zdeněk Roh, and Luboš Malina. In addition, there is material from the Banjo Romantika Band, a flexible group composed mainly of American musicians who contributed performances of Czech songs for the film. This group includes East Tennessee State University faculty Dan Boner, Brandon Green, Adam Steffey, and Colleen Trenwith.

Bobek, Pavel. *Ved' mě dál, cesto má* (Take me home, country roads). Bonton 4910542, 1998. Compact disc.

This collection, originally released on LP in 1975, includes the title track (a translation of the John Denver number "Take Me Home, Country Roads," which proved to be a hit with Czechs as well), along with retextings of songs by Kris Kristofferson, Don McLean, Roger Miller, and Billy Edd Wheeler, reflecting in its smooth musical aesthetic the pop-oriented approach that dominated Nashville-based country music in the early to mid-1970s.

Cash, Johnny. *Koncert v Praze (In Prague Live)*. Columbia 1113 3278 ZD, 2015. Vinyl LP, compact disc. Recorded April 11, 1978.

The Czech Supraphon company released this LP in 1983, using material recorded at Johnny Cash's concert in Prague in 1978. The 2015 re-release of the record on both vinyl and compact disc (as well as streaming and downloading platforms) reflects the resurgence of interest in vinyl as a format, but also the

From Czech Bluegrass: Notes from the Heart of Europe by Lee Bidgood. Copyright 2017 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Used with permission from the University of Illinois Press. <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/48dtf8rr9780252041457.html>

exoticism of Czechs' interest in country music: the package reproduces the explanatory notes (in Czech, with English translation) by Mirek Černý. This concert is also available in video form on YouTube in various versions; most include the Czech-language commentary by singer Pavel Bobek, who at one point remarks that Cash is a *živá legenda* (living legend). Cash's impact on Czech country music cannot be underestimated; for example, his version of "Orange Blossom Special" was the one used by the Greenhorns when they covered (and retexted) that song.

Čermák, Marko, and Greenhorns. *Banjo z mlžných lesů* (Banjo from the foggy woods). Bonton 491038 2, 1998. Compact disc.

This collection highlights Marko's work with the Greenhorns, and accompanies a book by the same title: part memoir, banjo tutorial, part songbook.

Cop. *His Master's Cop*. Vopava, 2002. Compact disc.

Cop (their name comes from the Czech word for "ponytail," not anything to do with police) are a longstanding institution nationwide, but they are especially popular near their Western Bohemian base in Plzeň. Led by guitarist and singer Miroslav "Míša" Leicht, they adopt a mode of biker-influenced costume (including black leather, big belt buckles, and sunglasses) and play a particular blend of hard-edged progressive bluegrass that emphasizes a rock stance and expressivity more than instrumental virtuosity. The band still records popular retextings of American songs by Bohouš Chaloupek (who long ago emigrated to the United States), for example, "Harley" ("White Freightliner Blues"), "Myslím na Colorado" (I'm thinking of Colorado), and "Tennessee Waltz"—all of which appear on this record. Chaloupek's versions of these and many other songs are widely known in bluegrass circles, and are widely played in Czech jams. Cop is still appreciated by older crowds, but their approach appeals less to younger audiences, who don't connect with this group's recycling of older material and tropes.

Druhá Tráva. *Best and Last*. Venkow/Universal 1539332, 2001. 2 compact discs.

This compilation includes a selection of recordings by the group Druhá Tráva, whose name can be translated as either "Second Grass" or "Other Grass," both of which suit this ensemble, which started close to bluegrass but has shifted to highlight the instrumental and ensemble virtuosity of the members, and the poetic lyrics and delivery of frontman Robert Křestan. This collection includes seminal works that speak to the group's founding during the transition of the early 1990s—and to Křestan's lyrical gift. The early song "Praha bolestivosti" (Threshold of pain) plays with the words *Praha* (Prague) and *práh* (threshold) in highlighting the role of the Czech capital in the 1989

“Velvet Revolution” and the unsettled times that it brought, using a poetic treatment of human relations to provide social commentary, a pattern that is also visible in “Panenka” (Maiden), a song Křesťan wrote while part of the Brno-based group Poutníci (Pilgrims) during the 1980s.

Druhá Tráva. *Shuttle to Bethlehem*. Indies Happy Trails MAM659-2, 2011. Compact disc.

This collection of songs by Robert Křesťan translated into English was intended for the US market. Druhá Tráva has toured the United States consistently since the mid-1990s, so while most of their records are sung primarily in Czech, with a song or two in English, they occasionally release an album sung primarily in English. Writer and journalist Ruth Ellen Gruber carried out the translations, in collaboration with Robert; she speaks about this process in the film *Banjo Romantika*.

Greenhorns. *Zlatá éra 1967–1974* (The golden era, 1967–1974). Supraphon 5802-2, 2007. 3 compact discs.

This collection features many of the band’s early hits, showing the range of songs that the group retexted and translated, from the lush exoticism of “El Paso” to the plaintive landscape painting of “Red River Valley.” In this period, the Greenhorns (Zelenáci) were joined by Michal Tučný, a powerful singer with a clear, high voice. His smooth delivery on songs like “Vlak půlnoční” (their retexting of “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”) contrasts with the singing of Jan Vyčítal and Josef Šimek, who match Johnny Cash on songs like “Když náš táta hrál” (“When Papa Played the Dobro”) and “Oranžový expres” (“Orange Blossom Special”).

Křesťan, Robert, and Druhá Tráva. *Dylanovky*. Universal 174 428-9, 2007.

The title of this album is not readily translatable—it is a way of saying “songs by Dylan,” using the *-ovka* suffix (pl. *-ovky*) that I have heard used in bluegrass circles as a way to refer to songs linked to a certain author or performer. For instance, gospel songs known to be associated with bandleader Doyle Lawson are sometimes identified using his band’s name, Quicksilver: *Quicksilverovka*. Robert Křesťan’s “day job” is creating literary translations of modern English-language literature for Czech readers, so this concept album is a logical variant on the longstanding Czech practice of retexting American songs. The band’s sound strays quite far from bluegrass on this record, including elements of Irish traditional music, jazz, and rock. For example, while Luboš Malina’s banjo is still prominent in “Señore,” their version of Dylan’s “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power),” hard-driving drum beats and electric guitar licks compete with him for acoustic space in the mix.

Kůs, Petr, and Famy. *Famy* (Rumors). Petr Kůs, 1999. Compact disc.

Petr Kůs is a Prague native, a teacher by profession, but also a mandolinist, bandleader, and songwriter who has worked with the influential bands Blanket, Quartet, and Vabank Unit, and as of 2017 leads the band Famy. Kůs is known as a skilled songwriter, but one particular comment I have heard about him (made by other Czech bluegrassers) is that his Czech texts “feel” like American (English) texts. Kůs’s website pokes fun at his reputation for writing in Czech with an American feel, joking that his hit song “Zlata rybka” (The golden fish) is “actually by Bob Dylan” (<http://www.famy.cz/#O%20N%C3%81S>, accessed April 7, 2017).

Kůs, Petr. *Nezrale mladí* (Immature youth). Good Day Records, 2006. Compact disc.

This release by Kůs features Dutch guitarist Ralph Schut, as well as a full slate of original compositions with Kůs’s trademark smooth, technically polished sound. With “Když se tak dívam vyš” (When I look up higher) he continues his history of retexting and creating songs that evoke a gospel feel without including a hard-hitting religious message. “Bejby, buď mou” (Baby, be mine) is an example of his more upbeat side, with a bluesy bounce that also carries the title track.

Liška-Malina-Nejtek. *Fragile Bliss*. Animal Music 053-2, 2015. Compact disc.

Banjoist Luboř Malina has worked on a number of side projects outside of his role as bandleader for Druhá Trava, recording his own exploratory albums as well as playing with singer Kateřina Garcia (a mix of Spanish and Celtic material) and the group Kon Sira (Sephardic songs). This album uses a jazz framework to continue this exploration of style, sound, and technique, featuring Malina’s banjo and an array of whistles and other wind instruments along with the more straight-ahead jazz approach of Tomař Liška (bass) and Michal Nejtek (piano).

Malina Brothers. *Rychlejší kone* (“Faster Horses”). Pepa Malina, 2013. Compact disc.

This family band, composed of Luboř Malina (banjo and whistles), his brother Pavel (guitar), and their half-brother Josef “Pepa” (fiddle), is a side project for these professionals, all of whom have multiple other work roles. The record’s eclectic mix of material reflects their personal and family histories, and a sense that the three of them are reflecting on their pasts. It includes Czech-texted Americana such as the title track, as well as a wistful version of “Lady Yesterday” and a romp through “Skočna,” a dance taken from Czech composer Bedřich Smetana’s opera *The Bartered Bride*, a tune that Luboř recorded with the Brno band Poutníci in the 1980s. The group has

developed from a side project to a lasting part of the brothers' work, with a release in 2015 in collaboration with Nashville veteran Charlie McCoy, and a US tour in 2016.

Monogram. *Siesta*. Monogram, 2000. Compact disc.

In 2016 Monogram celebrated their twenty-fifth year as a band (with some changes in personnel along the way). Founded by the Jahoda brothers, Jaromír (banjo) and Zdeněk (mandolin), the group in 2000 included guitarist and singer Jakub Racek. This album, produced by Slavek Hanzlík, an acclaimed Czech guitarist and an émigré to the United States, includes original songs by Racek and instrumentals by the Jahodas, as well as "Gone" by European bluegrass booster Liz Meyer. Racek does a spot-on performance of James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" in which almost no trace of vocal accent can be heard, a rare thing in any Czech performance.

Reliéf. *Leaves in the Wind*. Good Day Records, 1999. Compact disc.

Reliéf [was] quite a young band in the late 1990s when they began attracting attention on the Czech scene with their idiomatic singing, tight harmonies, and skillful instrumental work. Bandleader, banjoist, dobroist, and songwriter Zbyněk Bureš is a polymath who ties together the substantial abilities of the group and makes them more than the sum of their parts. One measure of Zbyněk's songwriting ability is that an original gospel song he wrote, "The Lord Will Answer Thee," was recorded by one of the most prominent gospel groups in bluegrass, Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, on the album *Winding through Life* (Sugar Hill, 1999).

Reliéf. *Suburban Street*. Good Day Records, 2003. Compact disc.

Composed mostly of original songs by Zbyněk Bureš, along with covers of "Cold, Cold Ground" and Tom Waits's "Wait 'til Yesterday Is Here," this collection shows how the group and Zbyněk's songwriting have shifted away from a more traditionalist take on bluegrass, and from gospel material. The bluegrass numbers are strong, but the most powerful number in my opinion is the achingly forlorn country lament "Poor Country."

Reliéf. *Live*. Good Day Records, 2006. Compact disc.

The release of this tour-de-force performance in Prague's Palmovka Theater includes twenty songs. This sampling of the group's repertoire reflects their increasingly cerebral choice of material—due in large part to Zbyněk Bureš, who wrote most of them, with the exception of their cover of Bob Dylan's "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)." A highlight is their rendition of "Už větry tichnou" (Already the breezes are quieting), a parody of early twentieth-century tramp song, which they took from the repertoire of the group Bobří

(Beavers). There are only two sacred numbers on this record, "Go Right Out" and "There Is a God."

Reliéf. *That's Not for You*. Good Day Records, 2011. Compact disc.

This is the final recording (as of this writing in 2017) by the band. It includes no gospel numbers, and while there are some in-the-pocket bluegrass sounds ("Dear Shelly," for example), the majority of the selections are less tied to that style. While they all stick to bluegrass-type instrumentation and textures, songs like "Alone with the Blues" and "Of Course Him" depart markedly from bluegrass techniques and narrative approach.

Roh, Zdeněk, and Guests, with Roll's Boys. *Raising the Bar*. Roll's Productions, 2008. Compact disc.

In this project, Zdeněk alternates between a number of sounds to encompass his expansive interests and abilities. The record presents the country-influenced bluegrass sounds of the band Roll's Boys playing a mix of covers and original material (like the first track, "When the Grasses Grow So Well"), and an ensemble with electric guitar and pedal steel (played by Zbyněk Bureš in a guest appearance) that mixes country sounds with more stylistically adventurous material like "Vanished Footsteps" and "Man at the Old Playground." The cover of "He's Got You" (a transformation of the classic "She's Got You") is a particularly strong example of smoothly aggressive "mash" bluegrass.

Seeger, Pete. *Pete Seeger in Prague, 1964*. Flyright 68 and 69, 2002. 2 compact discs.

This release features a recording of Seeger's famous 1964 concert in Prague made by Gene Deitch, a US-born animator and artist who had moved to the Czech Republic to live in the late 1950s. The package from the British Flyright label includes recordings that Seeger made especially for Deitch, with explanatory narration about the history of the texts, melodies, and instruments. Deitch and Seeger were longtime friends, and Seeger sent Deitch a recording of recollections of his Prague visit in 1964 that is also included.

Sunny Side. *Staří Greenhorni*. Self-produced, 2001. Compact disc.

This release by Sunny Side is atypical in that it is sung all in Czech. The group usually sings (almost religiously) in English, preferring a traditionalist approach to bluegrass that extends to their choice of ties, suits, and headwear. In this tribute to the Greenhorns, the band underscores the influence that Marko Čermák and his bandmates have had on the Czech music scene, and on generations of bluegrassers. Frontman Pavel Handlík's clear tenor soars convincingly through songs that were originally recorded by the Greenhorns'

Michal Tučný, finding its mark especially on numbers like “Vlak půlnoční” (Midnight Train) and “Řekněte jí” (Tell her).

Taxmeni. *The Best Of*. Venkow/Universal 0144032, 2001. 2 compact discs.

Taxmeni, founded in 1970, represent a stream of musical Americanism called Česká Country (Czech country), which is the core of the material played on Prague’s Country Radio station, 89.5 FM (www.countryradio.cz), and thus is heard in many working-class contexts such as workplaces and intercity buses. This collection includes retextings of musical Americana, including “Dědečkovy hodiny,” the group’s version of the Henry Clay Work song and bluegrass classic “My Grandfather’s Clock,” as well as “Hledaný muž,” which is a version of the song “Wanted Man,” co-written by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash.

Teagrass. *Večírek* (Party). Indies Records MAM176-2, 2002. Compact disc.

Headed by musician, chemist, and music producer Jiří Plocek, Teagrass mixes the styles that are listed on this CD’s package: “World Music, East European Folk Music, Bluegrass, Swing, Klezmer.” Such an approach is rare; most groups try either to approximate American sounds or to continue established forms of Czech country or bluegrass. This release is a live recording made in Brno’s Stará Pekárna (Old Bakery) club, and it sizzles with energy throughout. Guest appearances by Kateřina Garcia and Luboš Malina bring both folkloric and cosmopolitan sounds that complement Plocek’s distinctive mandolin and fiddler Stanislav “Stano” Palúch’s command of jazz and folkloric styles.

Tramenské Písňe 1920–1939. Supraphon 5379-2301, 2002. Compact disc.

This collection of tramp songs (most recorded in Berlin) features performers who were popularizing this form on vaudeville and theater stages in Czechoslovakia in the era of the interwar First Republic. The exuberance of the singers is palpable, with sparkling close-harmony vocals on fast-paced songs like “Chata v lese” (Cabin in the woods) by Settleři (the Settlers) and unabashed sentimentality on the tramp anthem “Vlajka” (Flag).

Films

Balada pro banditu (Ballad for a bandit). Directed by Vladimír Sís, 1978.

This film dramatizes Ivan Olbracht’s 1933 novel *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* (Nikola Šuhaj the robber), setting it both in the Ruthenian mountains of Olbracht’s story and at a Czechoslovak tramping gathering, complete with campfire, guitars, military backpacks, and cowboy hats. The songs by composer Miloš Štědroň further the in-betweenness by referencing at times Central European

folklore, tramp songs, and Czech country; the soundtrack is dominated instrumentally by the Greenhorns, including banjoist Marko Čermák.

Banjo Romantika. Directed by Shara Lange. Produced by Lee Bidgood and Shara K. Lange, 2015.

This feature-length documentary film is based on the research in this volume, and includes many of the musicians and places described in these pages. It is available through Documentary Educational Resources, <http://www.der.org/films/banjo-romantika.html>.

Big Picture: The Story of American Forces Network (AFN). Army Pictorial Center, 1962.

This film details the workings of US military media outlets in France and Germany in the early 1960s, providing footage of the *Stickbuddy Jamboree*, a country music show that broadcast from AFN Munich and was heard by many Czechs, including banjoist Marko Čermák. It is available in high-quality form from the National Archives and Records Administration, but is more accessible online at <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.2569813>.

Limonadový Joe aneb Koňská opera (Lemonade Joe, or the Horse Opera). Directed by Oldřich Lipský. Filmové studio Barrandov, 1964.

Even as this parody of American western films pokes fun at both capitalism and the film genre, it shows a great love for the image of the cowboy that it lampoons. While it doesn't feature any concrete traces of bluegrass, it includes a number of musical Americanisms, including a New Orleans-style funeral march and the quasi-English song "Sou fár tu jíš mej," which translates—or perhaps transliterates—as "So far to you I may."

Tramping in Bohemia. Produced by Margot Buff, 2011.

This short documentary follows a group of aging Czechs as they retrace steps that they took as youths riding the trains and hiking the woods, visiting storied tramping sites—and singing many songs along the way. In addition to providing background information on the current Czech tramping movement, the film conveys a sense of how tramps continue their activities in the present. It is not available commercially, but can be viewed on the filmmaker's website, <http://www.margotbuff.com/tramping-in-bohemia/>.

Websites

<http://bacr.cz>

The official website of the Bluegrassová asociace České republiky (Bluegrass association of the Czech Republic) provides a listing of bands, festivals, con-

certs, and other information, as well as archives of their quarterly publication *Bluegrassové listy*, and a more exhaustive discography of Czech bluegrass releases (listed under the link Česká CD). It offers an English version.

<https://www.banjolit.com/music/>

Slovak banjoist and entrepreneur Richard Ciferský offers a number of items and services on his Banjolit website: innovative accessories for musicians (particularly banjoists), as well as his services as an event producer and promoter—including for foreign artists who would like to tour in Europe.

<http://bgcz.net>

A social networking site, BlueGrassCZ offers a number of services, primary among which are the discussion forums, which include classified ads that host a brisk trade in bluegrass-related instruments. The vast majority of the activity on this site is in Czech.

Lee Bidgood, an ethnomusicologist and musician, is Associate Professor in Appalachian studies and Bluegrass, Old Time, and Country Music Studies at East Tennessee State University.