

Don't do as The Pet Shop Boys sang! Go East!

Let us start this post by making two statements and then pulling them together.

If one is interested in Pop Music-related travel, if one is travelling out of the UK one would probably, more than likely, head west to the States.

One of the reasons that 'Englishman In Slovakia' readers are visiting the blog is probably getting the low-down on where might be worth visiting in the country.

Taking the first, what you are about to read will make you think of turning that westward heading right on its head.

Taking the second of these statements, what you are about to read will make you think of a reason that has probably never occurred to you.

Now let us tie those two statements together.

How about travelling eastwards to Slovakia in particular and other parts of the former Eastern Bloc in general instead ...for Pop Music-related travel?

You are probably, at this point, thinking that a suggestion like this amounts to losing one's marbles, ever so slightly, thinking Eastern Bloc??? Pop Music??? How does *that* possibly go together???

If you were to go back just about two years in my life I might have thought exactly the same, so don't be so hard on yourselves for that incomprehension.

That was until, about this time of year in 2015, in a chance, almost throwaway way, at a course I was attending to improve my employability skills, the careers advisor, knowing my interest in Modern Foreign Languages, said something of the order of "Chris, if you're interested in careers using languages have you ever considered Eastern European languages? There's a real future in that."

In that strange, lateral way my mind tends to work, as I got home later that day, inspired by thoughts of things Eastern European, my mind strayed to thoughts of a lady by the name of Hana Zagorová. Little did I know where those thoughts would take me in a matter of a few hours. I've never had such a shock to everything I'd ever thought about the former Eastern Bloc in my life!

Now, why should my thoughts have gone in that direction?...a direction that would lead to setting up not just one blog ('Girls Of The Golden East') but another ('Bananas For Breakfast'). In fact, strike that, to some extent, since I'd not even thought of doing anything like blogging in any case – on a full-time basis, at any rate – thinking that my time was far too valuable for that. Wasn't that for sad weirdos with nothing better to do than report on every bit of

minutiae in their lives?...with all due respect, now I know better, to Luke himself! ;-)

The French Connection: 'I'll Go Where Your Music Takes Me'

We are now going to go back to this time of year again – but this time thirteen years ago. Bear with me! It will all make sense in the end!...and will serve to illustrate why I chose the subject of 'Girls Of The Golden East' in the first place.

My mother was in hospital having a heart operation and life was pretty stressful at the time. One of the things I used to do to relax (the past tense, since the space has had to be emptied out to improve the roof lagging since!) was to go up and see what I could find up in the roof space from 'olden times' for a trip down 'Memory Lane', even on hot, sunny May afternoons! In a whole raft of old 'Paris Match' magazines that I'd forgotten we even had I encountered, in the edition of 13th November 1976, a photo of a rather attractive young lady who was apparently a French Pop Star supposedly known to the English as 'Baby Star'. At the time that edition appeared I was a fifteen-year-old, so if there were any Pop Stars known as 'Baby Star' going around at the time I would have thought I'd have heard of the name 'Carène Chéril'.

The fact that that name meant precisely nothing to me mystified me, so I went 'a-huntin'' a few days later, for anything (in the good, old days of that now-defunct sound of the telephone dialling up the Web!) I could find on 'Carène Chéril'. A couple of the most notable things I discovered were that Carene Cheryl, as it should have been spelt, had the same birthday as me (19th July) and that there were short samples of the songs she'd recorded on the Web (remember, as I have said, that these were the days when I was on dial-up – broadband still being, for me personally, eight years into the future, so small samples were all I could get hold of, sensibly!). One of these was 'Ne raccroche pas, je t'aime' ('Don't Hang Up, I Love You'), a cover of the song by Jimmy James and The Vagabonds, 'I'll Go Where Your Music Takes Me', which would have been in the French charts at the time of the publication of that copy.

The other notable thing about Carene Cheryl was that her real name is Isabelle Morizet and was, in 2004, presenting a celebrity interview show on Europe 1 (that can be received in the UK on a regular radio with Long Wave), timed such that I could switch straight over from my beloved 'Sounds Of The 60s' on Radio 2 and listen to her show, so I became a regular listener of Europe 1 – a habit I have largely kept up, with a few gaps, to this day.

On and off, over the years since then, I have dipped back into things 'Carene Cheryl' 'Karen Cheryl' (her later, more anglicised, stage name) and 'Isabelle Morizet' so (now in post-broadband days!) what should I do, in late November 2014, but overhear my father (yes, I still live 'at home'!) switching on the radio to Jimmy James and The Vagabonds' 'I'll Go Where Your Music Takes Me'? The

long, slow smouldering of that decade was about to burst into flame and would bring three musical worlds together in a matter of months. December 2014 and January 2015 were *mad* for me on the Web, turning up this, that and the other on YouTube on Carene/Karen (...and that madness was to connect a matter of a few months later, thanks to Hana Zagorová). I'm sure my older brother must have wondered what long E-Mail with a whole string of links to YT videos awaited him next! I also wonder what Isabelle would have made of my dragged-up old A-Level French messages to the 'contact the show' page at 'Il n'y a pas qu'une vie dans la vie' ('There Is Only One Life In Life') talking of her old days as a young Pop Star. I thought I'd better start French classes after that to do a bit of refreshing!

One thing that had emerged was that January 2015 happened to be the fortieth Anniversary of the appearance of Carene Cheryl's first single, 'Garde-moi avec toi' ('Keep Me With You'), so with that immaculate timing I set off (thinking that this would be a long-term commitment) with the peculiar idea of ordering, on-line, her latest records, exactly forty years down the line. In that crazy January I also found out, on-line, that there was a copy available of the legendary French youth culture magazine (whose title was based, interestingly, on an accompanying radio show on Europe 1) 'Salut les copains' ('Hi, Mates') from July 1976, in which there was an article on Carene Cheryl, also featured on the cover, headlined 'Pourquoi Londres veut nous voler Carene Cheryl' ('Why London wants to steal Carene Cheryl from us'). I ordered that copy thinking that it would solve that 'Baby Star' mystery (it didn't!) and a remark in the relevant article about the paucity of female Pop Stars in the UK at the time, after the 'Glory Days' of the 1960s and how the UK was desperate to make a few 'imports', mostly from France, began to make me think about female Pop of that era on the European Continental Mainland in general and to think about this country's place in that grand scheme of things in a new light. It had a point. Little did I know, though, how badly we were about to be shown up by the former Eastern Bloc in general and Communist-era Czechoslovakia in particular.

The Scottish, Italian, German (and French) Connection: 'Les Rois Mages' ('The Three Kings')

Another French star on the front cover of that 'Salut les copains' was the huge star, Sheila – with whom Carene Cheryl was a label-mate at Carrère at the beginning of her career – who was about to become an 'import', as described above, the following year, as the UK went French Disco-mad, as Sheila B. Devotion – a reinvention that, incidentally, spooked Carene's Producer/Mentor, «Mémé» Ibach into 'upgrading' his young charge, 'Carene', the long-haired 'Boho' farmer's daughter, French girl next door and 'The New Sheila' to 'Karen', the pony-tailed, English-singing 'Sexy Star of French Disco' and 'The New Sheila B. Devotion'....for what good it did her in the English-speaking world!

Sheila had been a star in France since the early 1960s, but if one had been an average Briton in 1977 I'm sure that her pre-Sheila B. Devotion stardom would have gone right over one's head. This stardom included a comeback single after a low time around the turn of the 1960s to the 1970s with the French 'Sound of 1971', 'Les Rois Mages'. This was a cover of the record by the Scottish Pop Group, Middle Of The Road's 'Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum'.

One of the first journeys of post-broadband YouTube discovery I took was sometime in the Summer of 2013. We 'were in the Summer of 1978' during the re-broadcast series of 'Top Of The Pops' at the time and The New Seekers' 'Anthem (One Day In Every Week)' was shown. I was quite impressed and in the course of looking into that song on YouTube and the Web searching related to that I was taken back to the remarkable story (about which I had seen one or two things in pre-broadband days a few years previously) of how MOTR (Middle Of The Road) had been discovered in Italy and had been a huge name particularly in Germany (both Germanys, so it would appear, according to some latest news), but also all over the World – much bigger than they ever were in their home country. Their songs were covered in such diverse nations as the aforementioned France, West Germany, Finland, Argentina, El Salvador and by somebody called Hana Zagorová, – MOTR's 'Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum' as 'Pan Tydlitýt a pan Tydlitát' ('Mr. Tydlitýt And Mr. Tydlitát') – whose name looked vaguely Eastern European, but at the time I wasn't sure what part of Eastern Europe that was, but I was so taken with how big MOTR had been that this was a mere side issue at the time. I cannot believe how uncurious I was about her in the Summer of 2013! One would have thought that I'd have thought, "So, who is this Hana Zagorová and where does she come from?" and gone 'a-huntin'' – especially, in that performance on 'Písničky z kabinetu' ('Songs From The Cabinet'), given that the video opens with the camera panning up Hana's very attractive legs! – but no! I think the reader will also need to know that I mentally called her Hana 'Za-guh-ROH-vuh' at the time, as Britons tend to pronounce those funny names ending in '-ová' or '-ova'!

It was all very different in the May of 2015!

Thinking, after the aforementioned remark by the careers advisor, that I might look into her on the Web/YouTube to see what sort of Carene/Karen Cheryl-like discoveries I could make, that young lady with the strange, vaguely Eastern European name that had been on the fringes of all things MOTR about two years previously suddenly leapt into the centre of things....and I was off bothering my brother (again!) about Czechoslovakia this time, not France.

So, the Spring and then the Summer of 2015 (with an excursion to the Low Countries...see 'Girls Of The Golden East' for that!) and the Winter of 2015-2016 (with an excursion back to France and also to late 1960s French-speaking Canada, but that is another story!) will go down as the the time when, thanks to modern technology, what was going on Pop Music-wise behind the former Iron Curtain completely opened up to me and, reflecting those remarks in the 'Salut les copains' of July 1976, it was the female side of proceedings that grabbed my

attention – ‘exotic’ new name after ‘exotic’ new name. It seemed endless. They had *this* many???) (Including the *very* Sexy Star of *Hungarian* Disco, Judit(-h) Szűcs!) Another major discovery regarding the Pop Music scene east of the Iron Curtain (also in the time of my second raft of MOTR-related discoveries, since that also tied in with our entrants in the Eurovision Song Contest of 1972, were the entire ESCs, with jury voting, on YouTube from the early 1970s) were the song festivals and contests of the former Eastern Bloc, including Czechoslovakia’s Bratislavská Lýra (Bratislava Lyre) and Děčínská Kotva (Děčín Anchor). I think I also need to mention the TV shows and films of the Communist Era – especially of Czechoslovakia – that were a revelation in themselves. So, it was a whole world of hitherto unknown entertainment that opened up to me that will be alluded to again later (the same had happened relating to the life and times of Carene/Karen Cheryl and Sheila (B. Devotion), where such French televisual legends as the presenter of ‘Midi première’, Danièle Gilbert also came to the fore).

My experience with ordering Carene Cheryl’s vinyl on-line gave me confidence in this way of buying records, so I thought I’d try doing the same in the case of these former Eastern Bloc artists. In November 2015 that account was opened with the eponymous LP (recorded in early 1974 and released in 1975) of Valérie Čižmárová. Well, the cover art was rather ‘scenic’! Furthermore, although the initial ‘place to be’ and source of excitement was Hana Zagorová’s Far-Northern Moravia and Ostrava (being born in the suburb of Ostrava, Petřkovice), when it came to Czechoslovakia, I was always angling for artists from the Slovak portion of the country and Valérie Čižmárová was born not only in that part of world but also about as Far East as one could get – Michalovce.

In the January of 2016 the at-the-time irresistible opportunity arose to attend an ‘Eastern Bloc Disco’ and the only way to communicate with the person in charge, who did not appear to have a ‘find-able’ E-Mail address, was to open a WordPress.com account, which I did and it was then, in a blinding flash, (after having seen that blogging was not so ‘sad’ after all!), that I thought, “You know what? All those E-Mails were a sort of blog to one person, in effect! How ‘sad’ was that???) Maybe *I* should start a proper one...to the whole World!” Since my former Eastern Bloc discoveries were basically all female and it was quite obvious that we were dealing with a sort of ‘Golden Age’ – from my formative early living memory from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, but ending up overwhelmingly concentrating on the early to mid 1970s – and I knew of the opera entitled ‘The Girl Of The Golden West’, ‘Girls Of The Golden East’ seemed to come almost automatically as the title for the blog, but, apart from the initial post dated 16th January 2016 with a link off to a video of Hana Zagorová’s performance of ‘Pan Tydlitýt a pan Tydlitát’ it wasn’t until 28th March 2016 (Easter Bank Holiday Monday) that I really launched GOTGE, after going back through all those E-Mails – with one exception, all to my brother – removing any seriously personal material and converting them to blog posts and calling them ‘The Story So Far’.

In between times, I just happen to have visited Slovakia for the first time in my life that month...and I have been back to Slovakia *and* the Czech Republic since –

something that would *never* have happened without the quite wonderful world of GOTGE! Also, surprisingly enough, I have actually ended up visiting Valérie Čižmárová's birthplace *long* before my (as yet, still unrealised) initially-planned 'musical pilgrimage' to Isabelle Morizet's St. Germain-en-Laye (and her actual home town of Poissy)!

...which brings us full-circle to Pop Music-related tourism to Slovakia/Czech Republic.

As The Pet Shop Boys instructed The Three Kings headed West. *East* is the way an example of MOTR's music took me!

This is the long preamble to show how astonishingly short a time in my life has been occupied by these discoveries from beyond the former Iron Curtain.

I will now go on to put the Slovak-born GOTGE in some sort of historical context (on both a global and personal level), say where might be good places to visit in Slovakia, or where might be good over the border in the Czech Republic (if Luke doesn't mind!) if it relates to Slovak-born artists, to say why I have fallen head-over-heels in love with the fabulous music that 'Golden Generation' of female Pop talent, born in a period over the 1940s and into the early 1950s, turned out at a time of evident struggle for women in Pop in the UK and to pick out my favourite songs and artists. I think what you have read will probably have given you a clue regarding my favourite artist ;-)

The Historical Context

It is quite strange that the musical journey that took me to the former Czechoslovakia should have, in effect, started in France, since, if one goes back to the very beginnings of my awareness of global events – 1968 is the very first year I could say I reasonably clearly recall in that context, the year I turned seven – those two countries with capital cities beginning with 'P' were both very much in the news, with 'les événements de mai' ('The May Events') going on in the latter and 'Pražské jaro' ('The Prague Spring') in the former – the Communism with a Human Face that would come to a brutal end after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of 20th/21st August. It is also strange that Scotland should have featured in the wider story, since that would have been in the middle of the Summer Holidays when our family enjoyed its first 'Dormobile' holiday to the country (the first of many).

Although, in respect of the holiday to Scotland, the Summer Holidays of 1968 bring back happy memories, the heartbreak that that just-turned-seven-year-old felt for the people on the streets of Prague is one that has never left me, so perhaps there is something fitting in the fact that it is the Pop Music emanating from Czechoslovakia in particular that has ended up capturing that seven-year-old's broken heart. Talking of formative memories, that period would also have contained my first reasonably clear memories of the Pop scene and one of the most remarkable discoveries in this incredible two years is the fact that one of my Slovak-born favourites – see below – recorded cover versions of two records that were great favourites of mine around that time and some of the first vinyl I'd have played in my life – a sort of coming full-circle, reflecting the

connectedness that my discoveries since 2004 have revealed. So, that further backs up the way in which I have clearly been almost destined from a very young age to have been brought into very close contact with this musical world – not only from thirteen years ago! Although I have mentioned the covering of material of Western origin please do not go away with the impression that this is what Eastern Bloc Pop was all about. Their own tune-making was highly impressive and I have also discovered the superb orchestras, accompanying groups and backing vocalists, who should also get an honourable mention.

There is perhaps an irony, in view of my first memories of Czechoslovakia, inasmuch as it is the female Pop from the post-Warsaw Pact Invasion clampdown of 'Normalizace' ('Normalisation') that has particularly charmed me. Although, at that time, song lyrics were subject to some very close scrutiny from the authorities and the Pop scene had to be ultra-careful about what it was saying, maybe the essential spiritedness of the music was the only way in which the youth of the country could fight back and stay sane. Going much further back in history, after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the wake of WWI it was basically thanks to the Soviet Union's deadly foe, the United States, that the country of Czechoslovakia came into being in the first instance. One can almost 'hear' Czechoslovaks telling the Soviet Union, "We owe America everything. We owe you nothing. We'll be as American/Western as we like! What are you going to do about it?" I hasten to add, before I go any further, that my liking of the Pop and general entertainment of this period should not be taken as an endorsement of this odious and oppressive policy.

The Pop scene in the UK of the time (the relatively dire state of the female side notwithstanding) was also characterised by fun in the teeth of hard times – Bubblegum Pop, Pop-Soul, Ska/Reggae, Glam Pop and Glam Rock lighting up the gloom of industrial and social strife, an increasingly troubled economy, fuel crises and the Northern Irish 'Troubles', so in a way, we perhaps know all too well ourselves those mixed feelings where we feel tremendously nostalgic for the Pop Music but not so nostalgic for the wider milieu it inhabited.

Since I have just referenced musical genres, I suppose it would be wise, here, to say what has 'floated my Pop musical boat' over the years, further to fill out this context.

Certainly, I would say that all the aforementioned have done so, as time has gone by – together with Heavy Rock, Rock 'n' Roll, Disco, Latin, New Wave, Mod Revival (and original Mod/British Invasion-era music, such as Girl Group and Beat), Doo-Wop Revival, Rockabilly Revival, Blues and Blues Revival, Mod Jazz and last but by no means least, Tamla Motown and Northern Soul – although very much after the fact, since at its height around the mid 1970s I was more of a Heavy Rock fan, strangely enough. That's what I mean in my WordPress.com 'Gravatar' about 'apparently contradictory genres'!

So, now the reader fully knows where I am coming from, musically speaking, here is who/what I love about Slovakia and where the Pop Music-inspired traveller to that country (and to the Czech Republic) might like to visit – most

prominently, birthplaces. In general, as I am going through these artists and the places associated with them, one has to imagine this – since we are, after all, talking of Pop Music – as a sort of chart run-down of artists that have particularly caught my attention and what I consider to be their respective ‘greatest hit’. Also, in view of my still-young acquaintance with the scene, I am not going to pretend that this is in any way an exhaustive exposition. I am sure my knowledge base will be handsomely added to as time passes!

When writing about music, opinion and taste inevitably enter the equation. I am sure that the opinions and tastes of some readers will differ wildly from mine, but I make no apologies, in that respect, for what I am about to write. I may, also unavoidably, make remarks about physical attractiveness, which may be construed by some as ‘incorrect’. Again, I make no apologies for that. I’m an old, Seventies-generation lad, after all, so what does one expect!? If anybody does pick up on any factual errors that is a different matter. Please get in touch with me and I will endeavour to rectify any that may arise.

One note – there will be a concentration on Slovak-born artists, but occasionally one will note references aside to their Czech-born colleagues, collaborators and acquaintances. We are talking about a time when there was a country called Czechoslovakia.

Another note – some artists mentioned below are now deceased and in that event they will be referred to, generally, in the past tense, in case some readers notice what may appear a lack of consistency in use of tense. However, since I will not be referring to the current work of living artists, when referring to their music I will be using the past tense.

Marcela Laiferová (née Keblúšková) – formerly professionally known as Marcela Laiferová-Bujnová: born 14th July 1945, Petrovice, nr. Žilina

Anybody encountering this article who has a pre-existing knowledge of the female Pop scene of this era might well be shocked at seeing ‘The First Lady Of Slovakia’ so low down the ‘charts’. Don’t get me wrong. I do like the kinds of music she turned out, but I also do like strong, full and rich voices – preferably, all three. I am afraid to say that, in Marcela Laiferová’s case, there is something less-than-satisfying about the voice. I cannot avoid feeling a little bad about that, especially since I got a signed copy of her book – written in her professional capacity as a doctor – ‘Klíč k lásce’ (‘The Key To Love’) after having attended a concert by her, in January this year, at the Dom Kultúry Zrkadlový Háj, Petržalka, Bratislava, but even that cannot do anything to change those opinions on her voice and – reflecting the ‘opinion and taste thing’ – ‘feeling a little bad’ will not turn into an apology for that. This might not seem to chime with what I blogged about Marcela at GOTGE on 12th January, but that was probably written in a state of excitement as I was about to go off to Slovakia again!

This 'downer' out of the way, let us now concentrate on the good news regarding Marcela's life and work and how she relates, in a way, to Isabelle Morizet, which would be very apposite, in view of her Bastille Day birthday! (also my own due date, being five days late!) Apparently, at school, the young Isabelle was a very bright pupil and had alternate ambitions, as well as music and showbiz, for a career in medicine – ambitions that, in the event, were unrealised. Marcela has managed the miracle of pursuing both career tracks at the same time.

It is my interpretation of what I have learned on Marcela that she is referred to as 'The First Lady Of Slovakia' since she was, notably, the first major female Pop Star to have performed in Slovak, which is an indication that we are dealing here with a country which has an additional layer of fascination compared with not only other Eastern Bloc nations specifically but also other European nations generally – the fact that Czechoslovakia was substantially a bilingual nation (another linguistic grouping will be featured later), in which two languages of Pop existed, side by side, as more or less equal partners. This aspect of Alexander Dubček's liberalisation *did* survive into the years of 'Normalizace', meaning that, improbably, the European nation with the most thriving Pop scene in a language that was not the first language within its borders was a nation under a one-party state. The Slovak-speaking part of Czechoslovakia had its own radio-, television- and film-making scene too, based in Bratislava.

Having mentioned the word 'state' this brings up the matter of the fact that this apparently untypically thriving scene also existed on a record label – like all record labels in the former Eastern Bloc – that was state-owned; Opus of Bratislava. In the Czech-speaking part of Czechoslovakia the two major labels were the larger Supraphon and the smaller Panton, both based in Prague. This panoply of the state was a very different situation from what existed in the Capitalist West, where, for example, the stresses and strains at Disques Carrère and Productions Ibach within that, led to «Mémé» Ibach re-mortgaging his house to make a complete break for freedom, taking Carene Cheryl with him to a fully independent Disques Ibach. What has amazed me most about Eastern Bloc Pop and showbiz in general is that it existed in an environment without this 'inventive', 'nimble-on-one's-feet', Capitalist 'cut and thrust'. How can 'sclerotic' state-owned organisations and Pop possibly go together? I have found out that they could and it seemed to work quite well, actually. Indeed, the quality control was actually better than at Disques Ibach, where the former bright pupil, Carene/Karen Cheryl must have been endlessly frustrated by «Mémé» Ibach's shaky grasp of spelling and grammar on the sleeves and record labels!

One thing for which I have never had a satisfactory answer – on the matter of Pop under State Socialism – is the existence or no of what we understand by Pop charts, based on record sales, since I have, thus far, not seen any records being referred to as 'being No. 1' or 'being in the Top 10'. I have got to wondering if assessing records by how many were being sold might even have been considered vulgar and Capitalist. If they did not exist, how was the climactic excitement of finding out what was No. 1 that week replicated?

After this slight diversion, let us return to what I think, at the moment (these things are always subject to change over time) is Marcela's greatest hit on my 'chart'.

Although I have referenced the era of 'Normalizace' above, in this instance I think I will pick out something she recorded, still as Marcela Laiferová-Bujnová, in 1967, before Dubček's era of liberalisation came crashing down.

Perhaps the most remarkable discovery I have made over this past two years regarding female Pop Music of the former Eastern Bloc *not* relating to the former Czechoslovakia is that strange tale of how an exotic form of music such as Ska took root in Poland, largely thanks to the girl group, Ali Babki, AKA Alibabki with their pioneering EP, 'W rytmach Jamajca Ska' ('In The Rhythm Of Jamaica Ska') from a year (1965) only just immediately after the year that the term 'Ska' was even first used in the UK – a nation with considerably more to do with Jamaica than Poland has, surely. I have yet fully to tease out the story behind it, but it has something to do with U.S. Embassies! So, in 2015, Poland was celebrating fifty years of Jamaican music in that country – and we would think, in this country, that Poland and Jamaica could only possibly have anything to do with each other through the filter of being the origins of two significant immigrant communities here.

Poland was not alone in this trailblazing beyond the Iron Curtain. Marcela's 'Nemáš ma rád' shows that Czechoslovakia could produce its own Ska as well. I do mean 'produce its own', since the music was written by Marcela's husband, Jaroslav Laifer, the lyrics by Branislav Hlubocký, instrumental accompaniment coming from Caravan kvinteto, under Branislav Hronec. Yes, we can talk very alliteratively of 'Slovak Ska'. The 'Pop Pilgrim' (talking of alliteration!) can now, if they are a Ska fan, consider Poland and Slovakia as well as Jamaica itself as suitable destinations – especially a very small town in the highlands of North-Western Slovakia.

Who might have been born here? Could it be a Ska singer?

(In the YouTube video, the accompanying shot of Marcela is not of her in 1967, but from a much later image, dating from 1975, I think and this, I think, (in a photo where the photographer is unidentifiable) is the stunningly colourful and glamorous outfit she was wearing. It is almost a case of Joseph's coat!)



Eva Sepešiová: born 16th May 1946, Košice

We continue the theme, here, of music and medicine.

Like Marcela Laiferová, Eva Sepešiová is a trained doctor, only it is on this career on which she has chosen, ultimately, to concentrate, to the cost of her musical ambitions. I would, ideally, have liked to have put her higher up the chart, but there is so little to go on. She is perhaps the forgotten star of Slovakia, but one who has an astoundingly powerful voice, so I think that the pull of the career in medicine must have been even more powerful than that voice of hers.

Eva might have sacrificed, perhaps heroically, the fame and fortune of Pop, but she has left one truly tremendous song behind for posterity – the Soul of the highest magnitude that is ‘Chladná cesta’ (‘The Cold Road’), which also could be considered Northern Soul, in view of its danceability, even towards the slower end of the spectrum, or rather that new genre I am trying to create called

'Eastern Soul' – Northern Soul-like music emerging from the former Eastern Bloc.

The Bratislavská Lýra was not the only game in town when it came to song festivals/contests in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. There was also the Detva Festival, which must have been the host to some fairly strong competition in the 1969 edition thereof, since Eva only won the *Bronze Rose* with that song, written by Ervín Kliment, with instrumental accompaniment from Pavel Bayerle's Orchestra.

Here is Eva with other contestants in another edition of the Detva Festival (unknown photographer). I am offering no prizes for guessing which one is Eva and which one is going into the contest meaning business ;-)



So, 'Pop Pilgrims' of Soul – Detroit...or Detva?

Eva Kostolányiová (née Vermešová): born 2nd November 1942, Trnava, died 3rd October 1975, Bratislava

In a way, we are continuing further on a medical theme, but this time in respect of a recipient of treatment rather than a provider thereof.

In October 1975, we witnessed probably the very earliest passing of a GOTGE – the beautiful, talented fashion icon (the ‘Twiggy Of Slovakia’), Eva Kostolányiová – after a tough year-and-a-half long battle in the public eye with breast cancer at the tragically young age of 32. When thinking about Pop east of the Iron Curtain one may not immediately think of such high drama as a glamorous fashion icon dying young, but as someone who was actress as well as singer, Eva supplied that drama. It was also Eva who attracted me (a) to make her the second of my vinyl acquisitions from the Eastern Bloc (her one-and-only eponymous LP from 1973) and (b) actually to go to Slovakia for the first time in my life to attend a concert (also at the Dom Kultúry Zrkadlový Háj) in March of 2016 as part of the events marking circa forty years since her passing. Unfortunately, I ended up sleeping in my nearby hotel room (Hotel Dominika) through the concert on account of my physical exhaustion after an overnight sailing and train journey!

The many very attractive photos I have encountered of Eva and the stunningly fashionable outfits she wore (the stylishness of the women of Pop of that era beyond the Iron Curtain has been another of those numerous revelations about life there at the time) have led me to coin another suitably alliterative expression to go with ‘Slovak Ska’ – ‘Swinging Slovakia’. I have two particular favourites – Lubor Dolinsky’s photo of Eva’s yellow and green outfit photographed by a bicycle stand, with that lace-up neckline that would be hot now and, with the accompanying mini-dress, that delicious reminder that (as I once saw in a comment on some Web discussion about the late 1960s and early 1970s) at that time women were indeed at their very hottest and Tomáš Písecký’s photo of Eva looking basically like a million dollars in a black blouse, black hot pants (another reason why women were at their very hottest), patterned tights and wearing a very ‘designer’-looking watch – another outfit that would fly off the hangers now...and by good golly, could she smoulder or could she smoulder? This was what Communism looked like??? Forget about a fashion icon for the Czechoslovakia of the Communist Era, those photos of Eva would grace any front cover of a magazine now and make it fly off the shelf as fast as those outfits.

Výstava fotografií Evy Kostolányiovej (21.10.2012)



Lubor Dolinsky

▶ ⏪ 🔊 3:51 / 9:58

Výstava fotografií Evy Kostolányiovej (21.10.2012)



Tomáš Písecký

▶ ⏪ 🔊 2:26 / 9:58

Those sensational looks were backed up by a beautiful, smooth voice, as evidenced by my choice, here, from Eva's work – the track off the aforementioned LP that has steadily grown on me, despite higher-profile tracks elsewhere on the record, since I bought it in January 2016, 'Ruka s kvetom' ('The Hand With The Flower'), the music for this was written by Igor Bázlik with lyrics by Peter Brhlovič, instrumental accompaniment came from Gustav Brom and his Orchestra and backing vocals from RT-VOX. I happen also to think that we could be looking at yet more 'Eastern Soul'.

To think that somebody like that died at 32 in those circumstances is utterly heart breaking and must have been a keenly-felt loss not only to the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia but also to the whole of the country.

The reader must surely feel inspired to take a trip to the Nový Cintorín (New Cemetery) in Trnava to pay tribute to this lady who was beautiful in every way. I wish them better luck finding the grave than I had in January!



(Unknown photographer)

Jana Kocianová: born 8th June 1946, Šaštín-Stráže

When I talk of 'Pop Pilgrim' this is where the idea of pilgrimage becomes almost literal. I say this because Šaštín-Stráže is probably most notable to most people because of the Bazilika Sedembolestnej Panny Márie (Basilica of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows) – a place of religious pilgrimage – that dominates the small town. When I add that Jana Kocianová has become known as something of a Gospel Music Queen, this sense of matters being flavoured by religion becomes yet stronger, although one tends to associate Gospel Music with the noisy fervour of

Protestantism rather than the quiet fervour of Roman Catholicism. The Basilica is a heavenly vision at night, as this photo taken during my holiday in January of this year shows. (Christopher Bentley)



Ever since I first became aware of Jana sometime in only January of 2016 the idea of a singer in Communist-era Czechoslovakia being a Gospel singer has seemed decidedly peculiar. Even accounting for the fact that the lyrics to her songs would have been subject to scrutiny from ‘above’ (by which I don’t mean Heaven!) the very idea of even Gospel-style singing with non-religious lyrics may have seemed a little strong to stomach for the authorities in what was, surely, officially a God-less society. At any rate, the fact that I have described her in such terms probably gives the game away that her voice is towering and rich and her stage presence is magnetic.

One will have seen references to the Slovak/Czech thing about Czechoslovakia previously in this article. I think Jana managed to be both loyally Slovak in her recording output while managing to be popular also in the Czech part of the country, most especially for her appearances at the Městské Divadlo (Municipal Theatre) in Slaný, alongside Karel Gott and fellow early-June baby, Jitka Zelenková (more on her later) in 1973 and 1974 in the TV show, ‘Vzpomínková směs ze Slaného’ (‘Nostalgic Assortment From Slaný’), so, if the ‘Pop Pilgrim’ to Slovakia would like to hop over to the Czech Republic that is another town worthy of a visit. Taking that with Marcela Laiferová’s ‘handle’ of ‘The First Lady Of Slovakia’, for me personally (and this is probably going to make me feel even worse for Marcela now!), it is Jana who is the *Real* ‘First Lady’. (I have two more artists to go in this chart run-down, but since they both substantially decamped

entirely to the Czech part of the country to make their respective ways in the biz, singing also in Czech for the majority of their respective careers, despite my high estimation of them both this disqualifies them from that title).

The 'greatest hit'? Jana might be a Gospel Queen, but my favourite is a departure from the rushing around the stage hollering the lyrics and a return to the idea of 'Slovak Ska'. It is some of the most beautiful singing I have ever heard and shows one that she isn't just about the power.

The song in question is Jana's 1973-made re-working, in Ska style, of Jerome Kern's classic, 'Smoke Gets In Your Eyes', 'Ráno na šiestom peróne' ('Early Morning On The Sixth Platform'), with Slovak-language lyrics by Zoro Laurinc (credited as 'E. Laurincová') to the accompaniment of the Czech Radio Dance Orchestra in Bratislava, under Miroslav Brož.

In the YouTube video (from the following year - in black and white) of Jana performing the song on a (as yet, unidentified) TV show, she was wearing a very, very short dress, (which always does the heart good) the colours of which, thanks to this photo of her with her record collection taken from Jana's official site, I can now identify as blue with a shot of white and lime green – yet another pretty hot look.



Is the idea of a 'Pop Pilgrimage' to the home of 'Saint Jana of Šaštín-Stráže', as I think of her, an attractive proposition?

Helena Blehárová: born 28th June 1943, Žilina

The reader will have seen the reference to places of significance to my top ladies of Slovakia beyond the borders of the nation. If one were to include them in Helena's case I would not have to be making much of a journey at all in one case – to a place tragically in the news, as I write on 24th May 2017, in the context of a female Pop Star giving a performance there – since, in the year she turned twenty-one, she came to the UK to perform at the Manchester Jazz Festival, just about sixty miles away from where I am sitting right now. Try as I might, though, I cannot seem to be able to pin down where in the city that would have been exactly. In view of the aforementioned 'Salut les copains' article I've been wondering if any of the GOTGE attempted an 'invasion' of this island and it would appear that Helena is the only one who did, although not in the heart of what I have come to know as 'The GOTGE Era'.

It is so fitting that Helena should have been so close to me physically in my very young years, since (and the reader will have seen an allusion to this already) she released cover versions of two songs that would have been one of the first in the family's record collection, when my age was still measurable in single digits (and favourites then) – the cover of Dusty Springfield's 'I Close My Eyes And Count To Ten' as 'Až se mé oči rozevřou' ('When I Open My Eyes') and that of Manfred Mann's 'My Name Is Jack', as 'Můj Táta Jack' ('My Dad Jack').

By the time she went to Manchester Helena had already been based in the Czech part of the country for about two years (Brno), but she did 'return home' in the later GOTGE Era, releasing an eponymous LP in 1976 on Opus, sung in Slovak, showing that, although she had been a Czech-singing creature for much of the height of her recording career, the Slovak in her was never far from the surface and there are numerous tracks on that LP that show off her immense voice. However, it is to her Czech-language oeuvre to which I will turn for my 'No. 2'.

As well as the fact that Helena recorded versions of two of my ultra-early favourites what is also particularly fitting about the way in which she has arrived in such an elevated place in my chart run-down is down (subliminally?), I think, to her having appeared in a city in the North of England.

I am beginning to pick up information on actual recording dates, which brings the music's connection with events both around the World and in my personal life to life. Given that the Warsaw Pact Invasion happened on 20th/21st August 1968, if one of these dates is correct the recording of my 'No. 2', 'Slunce už hvězdy zháší' ('The Sun Is Already Putting Out The Stars') could not have come at a more significant time. I say 'if' since there is often some misinformation on the Web regarding recording dates, as I know – especially in the case of my blog ,BFB – to my potential cost! It's those old 'factual errors' rearing their head! Supraphonline.cz, I am afraid to report, is capable of making errors. According to Jozef Halušic's YouTube uploading of the song it was recorded on 23rd August

1968. According to Supraphonline.cz, however, the date is 23rd March 1968. Now, do I trust a non-primary source or do I trust a not necessarily reliable one?

At any rate, in case the reader has had their doubts, 'Slunce už hvězdy zháší' proves incontrovertibly that what most might think of as Northern Soul can entirely originate in a country like Czechoslovakia (therefore, more 'Eastern Soul'). The tune (and what a tune it is!) for this slice of pure, danceable heaven was laid down by Jaromír Kratochvíl. The lyrics were by Jan Šimon Fiala and the musical accompaniment was from the Gustav Brom Orchestra and it was recorded at the Czechoslovak Radio Studios in Brno. It is a very great shame, though, that the soaring backing vocals, that take the record to another level again, are apparently uncredited.

(I *can* credit this photo of Helena on stage in Brno in 1970 to no less than Vilém Sochůrek – whom I know very well – see below)



'Slunce už hvězdy zháší' could fill a floor in Manchester!

OK, so maybe, with Žilina being in the North of Slovakia, we could still call 'Slunce už hvězdy zháší' 'Northern Soul', in a way, after all!

**Valérie Čižmárová: born 29th January 1952,
Michalovce, died 7th March 2005, Prague.**

We have now, at last, arrived at my 'No. 1'!

Back in January 2015 I finally established – despite 'dodgy dates' in on-line resources indicating that she may have been two years older – that Carene Cheryl started her recording career aged just seventeen, so when I was going 'mad'

around that time, finding out the full 'goss' on her varied career on YouTube, including seeing the evidence with my own eyes of her drumming abilities, having been a First Prize-winning Drummer at the French National Drumming Conservatoire I thought I'd found one pretty impressive, hugely talented female Pop Star to have started her career at that age and one who shares my birthday, too! I didn't know what was about to hit me just a matter of months later...for which even this was scant preparation for the journey of discovery, of a *truly* out-of-this-world example of female Pop talent to start her recording career aged just seventeen, on which I was about to embark – a journey that would reveal easily the most marketable female Pop Star of that period in my life from late childhood to early adolescence, probably in the whole of Europe, maybe the whole World. Yes – marketability plus Communism!

In late August 2015 I 'met' Valérie Čižmárová. It was *unforgettable!* (If you go to BFB, you will see why).

Anyway, to summarise (if I can do justice like that!), how about this for a 'bananas' showbiz 'Life Story', Piers? ;-)

I grow up in a town about as far away in the former Czechoslovakia from Prague as one could get.

Before I go to school I only speak Hungarian.

I go on a talent contest aged just sixteen and cover a Kinks song, singing about 'breakfasting on a kilo of bananas'.

I go all the way to Prague to start my recording career.

My first single is recorded when I am still just seventeen....and is a Jazz treatment of a Soul classic.

My second single is recorded on the very last day of the 1960s.

The flip side to my third single, recorded still at just eighteen, is a cover of a song originally 'performed' by a novelty act of 'chimpanzees' played by session musicians (more bananas?).

In the mean time, the same year, I am performing as a singer/actress in musical theatre in Prague (amongst others, with the aforementioned Jitka Zelenková) and I record a Duke Ellington number for the radio, with a voice that almost defies belief for an eighteen-year-old.

At twenty I record a cover of a protest song written by a former Beatle.

(I think, around this time) I marry a top doctor (back to medical matters!) who rather fancies himself as a 'big shot' in the entertainment world, especially being married to an ultimate 'trophy wife'. We can't make 'super-children' together, so the marriage breaks down. He did buy me a very nice poodle, though!

In the year I turn twenty-one I record no fewer than six singles and their flip sides, plus another song (which sounds like it could have been sung by a true all-

time giant like Edith Piaf), I record a tribute in memory of the deaths of mountaineers and have that as the flip side to a cover version of an Archies song. Also in that year, I appear in the in-house magazine of the Communist Young Pioneers talking of my love for a very deep German-born author, a French Comedy actor and Tom Jones, Aretha Franklin and Jimi Hendrix.

A track on my one-and-only (eponymous) LP, recorded at twenty-two, is picked out on a fan site as one of my top five songs of all time and is used, before it had even appeared on vinyl, as background music in a scene in a film that could be described as 'a Kafka-esque Romantic Comedy'.

At twenty-five I appear on a New Year's Eve entertainment show singing a Hungarian Rock 'n' Roll number while dancing in silver platform boots.

At just twenty-nine my recording career is over as plans to record a second LP consisting of Hungarian-composed Rock 'n' Roll go awry.

I start a long career more as a performer/general entertainer than a recording Pop Star, including a comedy act playing a Blues and Soul-singing Cook from Slovakia called Maria Drevokocúriková.

My one and only 'Greatest Hits' CD released during my life (at fifty) comes about as a result of a friend taking pity on me for carting all my old records around with me in a large suitcase. ('Haven't you got a CD?')

I am about to embark on a comeback, recording Soul songs sung in English when my health takes a dramatic turn for the worse and I die aged just fifty-three.

Discovering a life story and talent like that started with this photo on the 'Discogs' site (unknown photographer)



...and continued with these cover shots, by Vladivoj Burjanek, from the aforementioned eponymous LP.



VALERIE ČIŽMÁROVÁ



I think the reader can instantly see the attraction! (Did I say that Valérie Čižmárová also just happened to have been one of the most knock-out and cute-as-a-button blonde bombshells ever? Nobody could wear a thigh-skimming scalloped-edged black miniskirt like that! As I said, at their very hottest).

Also, as this (favourite) photo (photographer unidentifiable) of her, in 1974, dropping in on some very lucky Czechoslovak soldiers based in East Germany shows, Cheryl Tweedy, Pixie Lott and Katherine Jenkins have got some way to go in the forces' pin-up stakes.

Valérie - Malý princ 1973



Did I also say that her voice went well into the ‘red zone’ of perfection that was the envy of some of the best in the business in the Czechoslovakia of the time? A voice like this came from a petite blonde babe like that??? (Oh...and she performed most of her recorded repertoire in what was to her, in effect, a foreign language, of course.)

Now, do I have your attention?

(Drum roll)

Ladies and Gentlemen

I give you my ‘No. 1’, ‘Dávno nejsem hloupá’ (‘I Haven’t Been Crazy For A Long Time’), recorded on 5th December 1970, at Studio A Karlín, Prague.

The great U.S. of A. had a group of ‘chimpanzees’ called Lancelot Link and The Evolution Revolution, performing ‘Sha-La Love You’, written by Harvey Price and Daniel Walsh. Comparatively tiny Czechoslovakia had Valérie Čížmárová singing the tune with Czech-language lyrics by Mirek Černý, to the accompaniment of the Czechoslovak Radio Dance Orchestra, under Josef Vobruba – the record being produced by Miloš Skalka.

I could have chosen any one of Valérie’s astounding fully natively composed songs, especially from her ‘Glory Year’ of 1973, but finding out that the Pop industry of a nation in the oft-derided former Eastern Bloc took a song with origins like that and turned it into high art, sung by a voice as phenomenally talented and listenable as hers makes it a totally irresistible choice. I call it ‘the

upgrade to end all upgrades'. The tune is a brilliant base, however, so the U.S. does make some valuable contribution here.

After all that, the reader must love to go to Michalovce, in the same part of Slovakia as Andy Warhol's ancestral town, Medzilaborce. 'Valinka', as she was affectionately known, surely deserves more than just the proverbial fifteen minutes of fame!

She could have become a global legend if those immediately pre-death plans had come to fruition. During my holiday in January in Slovakia and the Czech Republic I made it my vow to do it for her in death, after I'd gone down on my knees to kiss the precious ground on which those pretty feet had stood in 1970 with Jitka Zelenková at the steps on the Karlův Most (Charles Bridge) in Prague, in this striking image of Czech part meets Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, the photographer of which I cannot 100% identify, but I think it may be that regular capturer of Valinka's beauty, Vilém Sochůrek. Which is partly why I'm writing this article.



One could also visit any number of other Valinka-related attractions in Prague, most notably her grave at the Nový židovský hřbitov (New Jewish Cemetery) (Sector 23) (Christopher Bentley) which I am sure would become evident if the reader drops by both GOTGE and BFB, but I don't think I'd better stray too far from the point of this 'Englishman In Slovakia' post.



At any rate, although Valinka was far from what could be described as a 'Slovak artist', I am sure the reader will agree that she was indeed 'Slovakia's Greatest Hit'.

One final point

If you have gone searching for these songs you have, maybe, been mystified by the language in which they were sung. Do like me.

Download an on-line automatic translation application (I won't mention names for fear of it coming over as using the article for advertising!). Search out the lyrics if you can. Memorise some key words and teach yourself Slovak/Czech – the second language of Soul, Ska and Bubblegum Pop.

Happy learning and pilgrimaging!

Oh...and keep in mind the fact that, until still less than two years ago, I hadn't even *heard* of any of those GOTGE names!...well, apart from Hana 'Za-guh-ROH-vuh'!

