

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DBP-6

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Vladimír Merta

Prague, May 12, 1990

Dear Peter,

The following is a portrait of Vladimír Merta, the best singer-songwriter I've heard yet in Czechoslovakia. I liked his music from the first crystal-clear notes I heard from his steel-string acoustic guitar while at a friends house, two weeks before the revolution. My friend also told me that Merta is a film-maker, an architect, and a director of plays.

My first meeting with Merta was arranged by another friend of mine who's known him for some time. Back in February, Merta came by the student dormitory to pick me up. We were going up to Liberec, in Northern Bohemia, where he was going to perform. Precisely at the time he said he would, he appeared in the front door of the dorm, causing a minor stir among some students who recognized him. I climbed into the back seat of his old blue Lada and sat down beside the winter coats and an old plastic, soft-shell guitar-case for a small guitar. Vláša, as he introduced himself, introduced me to the man in the passenger seat, a young singer-songwriter from Liberec named Karel Diepold. On the drive north, Merta discussed Czech literature and American songwriters with quiet enthusiasm and a critical approach. Then he asked me, "Do you play guitar?" "Some time ago," I answered, "but it's been quite a while." "Good. You can play tonight," said Merta.

After a hair-raising ride on a snowy highway, during which Vláša's Lada threatened to spin three-hundred-and-sixty

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degrees but instead skated across the highway towards, but not into, a fortress-like wall, we arrived in Liberec in one piece. I had never seen Merta perform before, and I was surprised to see the pile of written lyrics he brought on stage. He set two small coffee tables one on top of the other, put his coffee cup on the top one, and the large pile of loose sheets with his lyrics on the other table. "There. Now I've set up my office."

It was a small music club but completely packed with people. Merta obviously had the audience engaged even before he started playing. To the show, he had brought a little Russian guitar. It was hard to believe that such a small, modest-looking guitar could produce such rich sounds. Merta's harmonica was also tiny, about two-and-half inches long. After playing a few songs, he invited his guests to play. Karel went first and then I followed. Not a comfortable feeling. I didn't exaggerate when I told Merta that I hadn't played guitar for a long time. Now I was stuck playing for an audience that had come to hear one of the best folk and blues guitarists in the country. Merta introduced me by saying, "I always assumed that all Americans play guitar from the moment they're born. I asked Derek on the way up here whether he played guitar. He said he did once, but had given it up for something more sensible." When I told his audience that I gave it up to study Czech they must have perceived a certain irony in Merta's comment. After seeing that I was a bit uncomfortable on stage, Merta jumped up from the front row, turned to the audience and began speaking to them in an exaggerated English to show, I suppose, that it's no easy matter to communicate in a foreign language. Merta, in general, is keen to break out of Czech provincialism and he doesn't hesitate to make fun of narrow-minded Czechs, as the following song, which I first heard that night, makes clear. His protagonist here is a parvenu arms merchant who crudely belittles his countrymen for their backwardness. (The purpose of the rather unpoetic translation is just to give you an idea of the content). It's sung in Czech except for the line "Sorry Vole [lit. "you ox", but as harsh as "jerk"]", I'm Czech."

### Bounced Cheque

Flowers from Antwerp, meals in my room  
champagne in the bathtub just to kill the germs  
My yearly earnings are more than a hundred grand  
But please don't interrupt, do not disturb.  
Who knows, knows how. One cheque does the trick.

That a man can have problems with the rate of exchange  
I just can't figure out  
I work abroad. The whole world laid out before me.  
But back home I'm on maximum vacation.

I can't stand beggars and bounced cheques.  
 With some folks you've got to be tough.  
 Because the word "man" -- that sounds heroic.

I'm the kind of guy you've got to envy  
 I'm the kind of guy who sees the world  
 Can you hear the difference -- Jsem Čech. I'm Czech!!!  
 I'm Czech, Czech, Czech, Czech, ČEDOK, Czech, Czech

What do you mean armed with a rocket. No way! Only Adidas and a racquet.  
 So the water's radioactive. No harm in that.  
 If you can't stand it save your money for a rope.  
 Someone's got a stick-on label, someone else has a Škoda  
 Škoda, škoda, škoda, škoda, škoda, škoda \*

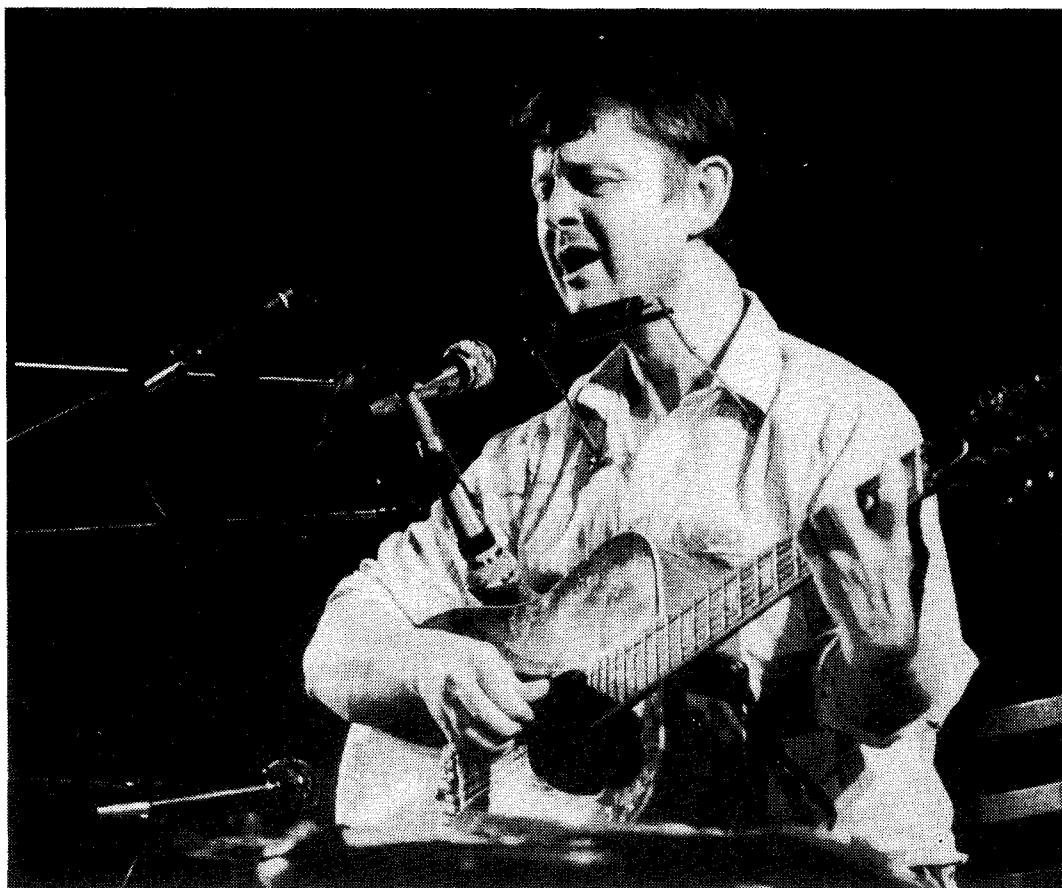
I can't stand Polaks. They don't work and they're always stewed  
 You tell me they've got Chopin. You must be jokin'! Always that lonely, A-minor tune.  
 That I eat America up, well, yeah it's true -- they've got it good.  
 Their cash wrapped in a package. And if they break a little finger, it's only strumming A-major.

What do you mean I'm a racist? It's true I can't stand Jews.  
 And gypsies, Hungarians, Slovaks. You know -- colored folks.  
 I can't stand those little camping people.  
 Everyone's got his hard luck story  
 What did you say, hillbilly -- that I'm like those folks from Southern Bohemia?  
 Sorry, you jerk. I'm different -- I'm Czech.

(\*this means both the automobile and "too bad").

Merta ended his show with the challenge to the audience that he would sing anything they brought him and in any style they wanted. People brought their own love poems, prayers, and sheer nonsense up to the stage. Then Merta asked for money, hard-currency, which he promised to return after he had "sung" it. Sure enough, we got variations on "In God We Trust, One Dollar" and "William Shakespeare, Twenty Pounds Sterling".

After Merta's show we went to Karel's house in Liberec where his mother and sister were preparing dinner at the late hour of ten o'clock. Merta was obviously exhausted. We ate fairly fast and left about 11:30 so we could get back to Prague by about 2:00 a.m. The snow was coming down hard and had a hypnotizing effect. Merta told me about his relation to Czechoslovak dissidents. He had never been a dissident. "I never wanted to join the underground." Charter 77 got into his hands not long after it came into being back in 1977, but he didn't sign it, largely because, as he readily admits, he was afraid of the consequences. By contrast, however, he was one of the first to sign "Several Sentences" [Několik vět], the intentionally mildly-worded document of June 1989 that again asked the Communist Party to note the growing tensions in



society and begin to remedy the situation before events came to a head. Too late for that.

Merta lives in the district Prague 6, near the Markéta monastery, in a two-room apartment with a large kitchen. He has known his wife Lucie since they were in their mid-teens, and they were married in 1976. Lucie studied Japanese at Charles University and also speaks excellent English. They have two daughters, Rebecca who is 13, and Sarah, 8. Rebecca is a big fan of the British pop singer and sexbomb, Samantha Fox. In the girls' bedroom, which doubles as the family's living room, the wall near the top bunkbed is covered with six large and different Samantha Fox posters. "How did you get those?" I ask, knowing that they're not available in Prague stores. "At school, black-market trading," answers Rebecca, a little bit pertly. Merta asks me if I'll do a him a favor and transcribe some of Samantha's lyrics to paper for Rebecca; he's given it a try but there are some words he just can't, or doesn't want to, hear. "Great lyrics," comments Merta dryly on his thirteen-year old daughter's choice of music. "'I want to feel you inside me' and so on. I think they make it deliberately inaudible just to hide the stupidity."

"Dad, just can't speak English well enough," says Rebecca, preparing the pen and paper for me to have a go at deciphering Samantha.

A couple of weeks later, I'm back at their house and we're watching the Pope on television as he gives an open air mass in Prague. On the one hand, Merta feels he ought to be there in the crush of people on the Letná plain just to experience the atmosphere, and on the other hand he thinks it looks a lot like the Communist May First celebrations that were held on Letná in previous years. Nevertheless, he says "It's interesting that after all these years the Communists were not able to wipe out people's faith in God." And then Rebecca starts pouting because Merta has promised to help her with her physics homework. While Merta is fulfilling Rebecca's request to help with physics, Lucie and I watch the end of the Pope's mass. As I'm leaving for home, Merta and his daughter are at the kitchen table. He's trying to explain Archimedes' principle and then the principle of a vacuum. He's holding a large plastic syringe, which he dips into a bowl of water. "Remove the plunger," says Merta, drawing it slowly out of the syringe, "and you make room for the water. Nature abhors a vacuum." Just like it did in those days back in November and December.

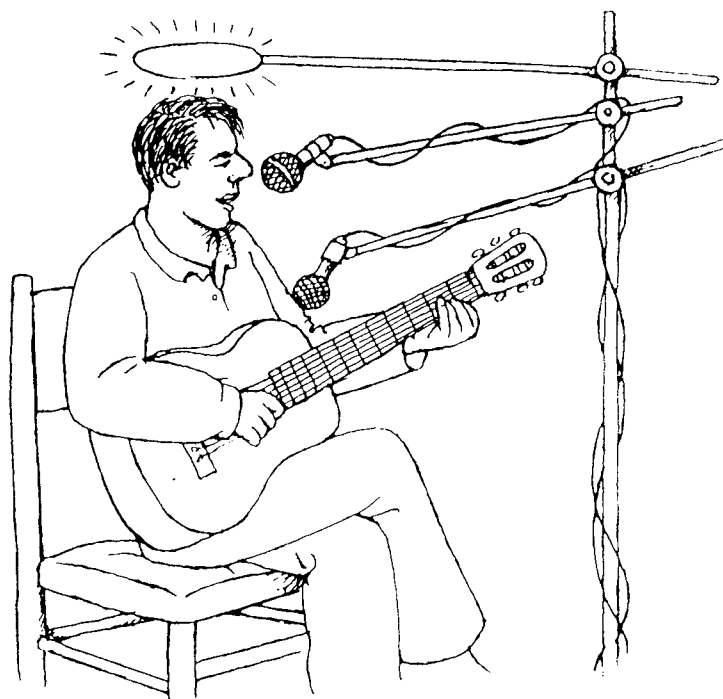
Recently, Merta and his family returned from a week's vacation in Israel. When I arrive at their house Lucie tells me that Merta is playing around with a video player in the other room. On the television, which along with the video recorder is perched on the top of an upright piano, Merta is watching an American documentary about President Havel and especially his play Audience. For royalty purposes, he's timing how many minutes he appears in the documentary and how many minutes of the theme music, which he wrote, they're using. "Here, I am. The fat guy with the American accent." Sure enough, there's Merta -- not at all fat -- on the screen, walking down a path towards his little recording studio, where a few years ago he had clandestinely recorded readings from Nobel Prize laureate Jaroslav Seifert's memoirs, Všechny krásy světa [All the Beauties of the World]. He tells the camera -- without an American accent -- that this is where Václav Havel and Pavel Landovský recorded Audience. (Both recordings were released in Sweden on the Šafrán label.) On screen, he invites us into his tiny homemade studio and describes how, knowing Landovský's booming voice, they insulated the studio with all available material -- mainly diapers -- "in case the neighbors recognized the voices and wanted to call the police for us."

Lucie also tells me about their trip to Israel, especially that "Jerusalem is a must," and how Merta, "the fool", was swimming on a day when, due to the rough seas, swimming was forbidden. Merta's face lights up. "On the beach in Israel, they have these very dignified-looking lifeguards," he says, "who just walk along the beach slowly and very nobly. After

one had been blowing his whistle for some time, he came running up to me as I was coming out of the water and said 'That wasn't very wise -- you see, you made me run.'

Merta, who was born in 1946, first wanted to be a sailor. He was planning to go to Gdansk and join a maritime academy, but his father, one of the founders of an information sciences institute in Prague, was horrified and told Merta that he should study something creative, like architecture, at least. After the six-year program, Merta got his degree in 1969 as "ing. arch." (engineer-architect), albeit with the worst possible mark. "Vláda brought in his final project but with one major omission," says Lucie in a matter-of-fact voice. "The house he designed had no stairs." "Maybe he thought people could fly," I offered. "No, he just forgot." His reputation as an "enfant terrible" at the Czech Technical University didn't help either.

He started playing guitar as a student during his first visit to the UK where he worked in Cambridge for the Service Civil International camp (They provided room and board and Merta, in return, worked in a mental hospital). He was strongly influenced -- as were many young people at the time -- by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Steven Stills, Leonard Cohen, Randy Newman, and Joni Mitchell. He soon found his own style, ranging from jazz and the just-mentioned influences to sophisticated rock chanson. His first album, Ballade de Prague, was recorded in Paris on Vogue records in 1968.



Merta also holds a degree in film and television direction from Prague's well-known film school, FAMU, where he studied from 1970 to 1976. His cinematic and dramatic sense are obvious in his songwriting (and in his behaviour as well). He loves imagery, and when I presented him with a translation of his song "Astrologer" he looked it over and then told me that he intended the first line to describe a man who is striding down a street and eccentrically swinging his arms. "Like this," says Merta, about to give me an example of the directing technique that his actors in Olomouc, current home of the play he's directing, experience. He gets up and takes a few large paces back and forth in the kitchen and, of course, swings his arms wildly about.

Astrologer

Fluttering hands, tobacco lungs  
 on a naked body he hides a zodiac  
 You understand easily, you understand more  
 before you stands an adventurer  
 Astrologer in a tattered scarf walks down the street

He sold himself for the power of black magic  
 for hours he stands alone in the corner of a secondhand bookstore  
 In the days of the solstice he circumscribes signs  
 on the shabby cuffs of his overcoat  
 Looking for the face of the brother of the man who killed him

He knows by heart the path of the stars, the meaning of eclipse  
 alone worthless and empty like a book of poetics  
 Left foot first he steps into the tram  
 In timetables he's looking for the rules of anagrams  
 His tattered old scarf is blowing down the street

He bets the magic number he never wins  
 The killer from a black limousine tosses flowers on him  
 a fistful of banknotes on the candles and the coffin  
 The body becomes transparent like a gem against the moon  
 The smell in the air of sage and cinnamon

His tattered old scarf is blowing down the street

The only films Merta made himself, however, were at the school. One was a half-hour film of Smrt krásných srnců [Death of the Beautiful Deer], from the story by Ota Pavel]. Lucie, - who is not too quick to praise her husband -- said that Merta's version is purer and more genuine than the one by Karel Kachyňa, which came out in 1987. Another was a short documentary about Prague's decaying public transport system. I asked Lucie how Merta could make a film that was critical of a state service. "The school had a much more liberal atmosphere than elsewhere. Besides, Merta graduated from FAMU with the worst possible mark again, because of his lack of political loyalty. Again he was an 'enfant terrible'. He simply did what he wanted."

The films Merta has worked on with other people include František Nebojsa [Frankie No-fear]. An animated film based on a story by Jan Werich (the well-known writer-performer from the duo Voskovec and Werich). It was produced at Trnka Studios. (Trnka was one of Czechoslovakia's foremost illustrators and animators and illustrated the Werich book from which this story came). Another film is Kamenné varhany [The Stone Pipe-organ]. An animated film with M. Sukdoláková (also at Trnka

Studios). After working with Jaromil Jireš, an established filmmaker from the Czech "new wave" of the sixties, on Opera ve vinici [Opera in the Vineyard], Merta got a call from Barrandov Studios, whose chief executive at the time was an StB (secret police) man, telling him not to bother returning to work. The dismissal was largely because of Charter 77: although Merta didn't sign that document, he also didn't sign the Communists' attack on Charter 77, entitled the "Anti-charter". Some of the disappointment, especially the references to the film career is incorporated in the following song.

#### Video 2000

The Minister's boy got me on video.  
Comrade Donovan -- from what I hear -- is writing about me in Melodie.  
My unsuccessful film is playing with success in empty drive-in cinemas.  
I stand as a model for myself and, it's true, for any novel's theme.

The world is full of prohibitions, announcements and pronouncements  
Who spots me in there is definitely mixing something up.  
Before the wheel of history finishes grinding me to powder.  
I'm going to write my song of songs of mid-range flight.

Someone likes his children and others like to beat them  
One man says peace and is thinking of war.  
A little dwarf -- a country -- ends like a great black hole  
in a distant galaxy the telescopes discover a totally new advanced civilization.

I'm just a little Czech man -- I'm announcing my humility  
I haven't bought a Trabant, let alone a Mercedes Benz  
The first one reminds me of driving through a gas chamber,  
The second of the uniforms and the weapons of the SS.

My little ship of hope is approaching the clouds  
I'm not complaining -- I know, I was warned many times.  
Has somebody stopped playing? So I'll start for a change  
so that the proportions of good and evil in the world remain preserved. (1984)

In the years when performing was difficult or impossible, Merta remained active. Indeed, Lucie says that Merta "was actually very glad when the Communists banned him. "'If they hadn't banned me', Merta used to say, 'I would have to find the free time on my own to rejuvenate myself.'" Hence, Merta directed his creative energies elsewhere.

Merta has written soundtrack music for more than twenty animated films. One night at his house, his youngest daughter, Sara, is walking briskly from room to room, asking impatiently if the evening animated film hasn't yet begun. "Not yet," says



her sister, somewhat ambiguously and drawing out the tension for poor Sara. When it starts the daughters usher me in to see the evening cartoon and "to hear the music Dad made." "Stupid, eh?" says Rebecca, then the girls watch it engrossed and without further comment.

In 1981 and 1982, Merta's two little instruction manuals (about 25 pages each) for folk guitar and blues & folk harmonica were published by the "Institute of Education of the Musicians Union for the Club of Friends of Young Music". The books, however, had a very limited distribution -- as it says in the colophons at the back of the books, "instruction method for inside use of the Musicians' Union."

From 1982 to 1984, he wrote a 140-page "A to Z of song-writing", entitled Zpívaná poezie [Sung Poetry], which just came out this month. When I asked Merta to sign a copy I had bought, he laughed and said "Oh, so this is what it looks like! I haven't seen it yet!" He flipped through it, told me it was written six years ago, and admired the cartoon illustrations by Jiří Slíva, which he said only took Slíva a week to draw. He looked at the back for the colophon which says that there were 40,000 copies printed at 28 Kčš [Czechoslovak crowns] each, and did a quick calculation to see what Panton Books would earn in gross, namely, 1,120,000 Kčs. "They paid me 16,000 crowns," he said. Another book is entitled Básníci s kytarou [Poets with a guitar]. To be published this year by Práce Publishers. It is a compilation of folk singers' lyrics accompanied by biographical sketches of the singers.

And last year, a novel he had written for teenagers, called Výhoda podání [Advantage to the Server], was published by Albatros, the main publisher of Czech children's literature. It's a 200-page novel that "deals with the problems of young tennis wizards," who, Merta says, "see the world more clearly than their parents." He had also written the book at a time when he had been banned from performing.

Merta nevertheless has performed, and continues to perform, all over Czechoslovakia. In the times when he was banned -- "about every two years for a two year period, then two years playing, then banned again, and so on," says Lucie -- he could only play in small university clubs or completely illegally (which was quite dangerous). The bigger engagements have included the annual, four-day Porta Festival in Pilsen. Its audience of over 30,000 people comes from all over the country, and it has tended to be a place for subdued protest songs against the government. Porta is one of the places where, a couple of years ago, Merta ran into trouble with the Communists. Porta's organizers asked to see his set list, which they approved, but when the crowd shouted for the song "Magical Prague", Merta obliged them. Lucie says that playing the song really was a stupid reason for the authorities to go after him, especially when he has a lot of other songs that



are more openly anti-regime. Apparently the last line about false prophets upset the powers-that-be. If you look at the song, however, you see that there's more to it than that one remark. This song, which takes the listener on a stroll through centuries of Prague's darker history, has a rhythm reminiscent of an old military march, and Merta sings it in an especially deep -- and 'Sparta'-cigarette-enhanced -- voice.

### Magical Prague

Glory to you, Prague, blessed mother of cities  
at the intersection of old roads of amber built  
in the damp remains you smell the scent of an ancient celtic settlement  
in the jail of nations you sleep -- waiting for what Vienna gives and allows

A dark corner of the Týn Church -- Prague of the Hussites  
alchemy of the ages you breath Rudolfine magic  
through half-opened door hinges of Europe roars your dream of a common Prague prostitute  
Prague conquered plundered in itself suppresses anger.

The city of the gallows and of lords of waiting queues for the hangman  
full of Jesuits you collect your strength -- retribution is coming  
Universities from which Czech erudition disappears  
shameless whore of power you'll never ever have enough.

Prague dead-drunk on power sleep to out scream the noise of muteness  
a thorny crown -- your coronation jewels  
Prague of legends and magi the shem of rabbis and invention  
of banners of hope of whispering propaganda and absurdity.

Martial law long black-outs suppressed anger  
Prague of the swastika of pogroms and red decrees

of orgies of evil of horror of people driven through the streets like cattle  
full of bullets little monuments and crumbling plaster.

lilac fragrance of spring rises from the parks  
intoxicated by an accordion you quickly change the mood  
Prague of housing projects excavations and eternal scaffolding  
cradle of my world of the cosmos and the prisons.

City tempest in a glass of beer discussions  
of poets writing their verses at meetings  
like balloons from fairs suddenly flying away  
you endure you grow get strong desire drugs curses.

Across the square where once preached a revolutionary priest  
rustling of cheques limousines of a society without money  
At the corner pub "Parliament" where you can talk --- only quietly  
After a hundred years you can have a street like Master Jan Hus.

Years follow themselves as the high waters of the century  
centuries upon centuries makes one-thousand years.  
One millennium to the next millennium -- that's already a new epoch.  
Futilely we stand and wait for the false prophet.

The audience that year voted Merta the best musician of  
the festival, but when he went to pick up his prize the music  
union told him he wouldn't be playing anymore.

His most openly anti-Communist song, "Distant Gunfire"  
[Vzdálené výstřely], comments on the massacre at Tianmen  
Square. It has the refrain "Who murdered on the road to power,  
murders and will keep murdering." Some of his friends who are  
pop and rock music critics said the song was too obvious, even  
"kitschy", but Lucie thinks it hits the nail on the head.  
Merta played it last year at the Svojšice Festival, and the  
audience of about 20,000 gave him a great reception. It was  
perhaps an indication that the Communists in Czechoslovakia  
were already losing ground before November 1989 that Merta was  
not reprimanded for this song. With the events last winter in  
Romania, Merta added Timisoara to the song's list of cities  
that already included Prague, Budapest, Tbilisi.

In all Merta has composed about 350 songs and has written  
and additional 50 poems. It wasn't until eight years after  
the French release, however, that his first Czechoslovak  
album, P.S., came out in 1976. It was another long wait -- 13  
years -- before a Panton (one of Czechoslovakia's two record  
companies) released Vladimír Merta 1 This is a live recording  
from 1988 of Merta playing alone before an audience at a small  
club in Prague's Malá Strana. Thanks to Merta's diverse styles  
of guitar playing -- country, blues, and quasi-baroque -- his  
harmonica playing, which he uses to provide harmonic  
accompaniment and counter-melodies to his own guitar lines,  
and a strong, clear falsetto and regular baritone voice, the

album is surprisingly entertaining. More songs from that concert were released this year on the album Vladimír Merta 2. Merta claims to have enough recorded material for seven more LPs. Also in 1989, Merta's work appeared in a package by the Klub přátel poezie [Club of the Friends of Poetry], which is part of Československý spisovatel [Czsl. Writers]. This consisted of a tiny book of Miroslav Holub's poetry, a cassette of Josef Kainar's poetry set to the music of Vladimír Mišík, and Merta's cassette Struny ve větru (zpívaná poezie) [Strings in the Wind (Sung Poetry)]. He has put to music a dozen poems by the prewar poet Josef Hora, and others of that generation such as Jiří Orten, Jaroslav Seifert, Viktor Dyk, and a translation of Artur Rimbaud's "Má bohème".



One of my favorite songs, because of its strong melody and sparse lyrics, is made from the poem "Plíží se večery", by Viktor Dyk, and is on the album Vladimír Merta 2. It translates as "Evenings are Prowling". Merta says it was written when Dyk was in his early twenties and that it reflects the changing atmosphere in Central Europe and the search for some new movement, probably a flirtation with anarchism. Dyk went on to be a respected writer and politician during the First Republic. The poem/song has extra poignancy when placed in the pre-November 1989 context. I've managed to make this translation fit the music.

Evenings are Prowling [Plíží se večery]

Evenings are prowling, loneliness prowling  
the last outcry is lost in the edges  
great big pains, great big slogans  
evaporating  
evaporating

Yesterday we laughed, yesterday we deceived  
yesterday we rioted, yesterday we beat  
the horizon closed the day we'd sleep  
and there's no strength left  
and there's no strength left

For something silence for something pity  
For ourselves scoffing grins is all we get  
Damned to hell as our deceived being  
evaporating  
evaporating

Merta has recently been able to play abroad, and this helped give him a new perspective. At the Roskilde Festival in Denmark in 1988, for example, he saw the situation at home in a new light: "Singer-songwriters who have remained in their native land have, like the rest of the citizens here, been forced for many years (one could say since 1939, with the exception of the three short years after World War II and the short time around 1968) to live in isolation from the world outside. This means that our knowledge about the world and even about ourselves is sadly insufficient. The Roskilde festival put me on a stage devoted to "Third-World" music. I was surprised at first, and then I realized that the decline of our country was so great that we had even refused to accept it."

In December 1989, he played in Vienna. "We had tried not to go, because we wanted to be at the demonstrations on Letná," says Lucie. "We plastered our car windows with Civic Forum propaganda and Havel's picture, hoping that the customs officers wouldn't let us out of the country. But it didn't work. And since Merta already had posters printed up in Vienna, and since he hates to let his fans down, we went to Vienna. We really wish we could've been at Letná for the demonstrations." Merta has also played in Freistadt, Germany, and in Sweden early this year, where he also conducted a music workshop. One of the biggest moments of his performing career was inviting Joan Baez (an early influence of his) to Bratislava. It was in January 1989, and from the stage she openly stated her support for Charter 77. She was rewarded with thunderous applause and having the soundman turn the microphones off. She invited Ivan Hoffmann, a dissident-folk singer (now a politician) on stage, and they all sang "We Shall Overcome." This event was topped, one year later, when Merta sang on Wenceslas Square to an audience of about 250,000.

Merta is currently in Great Britain for two weeks as a guest of the British Council. He has managed to contact the company of British musician and song-writer, Peter Gabriel. He'll see Gabriel's studios in Wiltshire and discuss the possibility of hooking his own Czech record label, Šafrán, into Gabriel's creation WOMAD [World of Music, Art, and

Dance], which specializes in organizing shows from around the world. "Walking through the small artisan WOMAD shops," says Merta about his stay at the Danish Roskilde Festival, "I saw the records, cassettes, and public relations material of small nations. I thought how fine it would be if Czechoslovakia could be represented there, too. In spite of, or perhaps due to, lost contacts with the English-speaking music scene, we can offer a lot of independent, original music, based on poetic lyrics. In a sense the famous American flower-power movement has been reincarnated in Eastern Europe. We are prepared to accept any serious invitations to spread the ideas and atmosphere of the newly established Central European spirit." He believes that the key problem of the language barrier could be overcome by creating songs -- even bilingually -- on commonly held views. "The aim is to introduce our views to the views of our colleagues abroad and to share ideas and inspiration."

Šafrán Records (pronounced SHAF-rah-n and meaning "saffron") is the Czech record company that was established in Sweden from where it released 24 records. It was for many people in Czechoslovakia the main source of unofficial culture and protest. After the revolution, a group of singer-songwriters (Jiří Pallas, Jaroslav Hutka, and Vladimír Merta) brought the record label home from Sweden and re-established it here in its native land. Šafrán, I've heard from several people, represented one of the few sources of independent culture and protest. Other Czechs agree when Merta says that Šafrán had "a unique role at the cultural level. It was for years the only field in which one could express oneself freely, and it bridged the gap between the officially acceptable culture and the state-rejected dissident culture. The obvious homemade quality of songwriting in the process of self-interpretation escaped much of the omnipresent state-run censorship. Folk artists have gained great support from the public, largely through clandestinely made samizdat cassette tapes."

The first issue, No. 0, of their newsletter, the Šafrán revue has just come out. "Dear Friends," they write in their introduction, "the new possibilities for life in society bring with them diverse conditions for Czech and Slovak songwriting. On the one hand, freedom of speech and on the other hand the hard economic dictates vis-à-vis culture. How to find the way between the two [...] is what Šafrán wishes to do." Šafrán also wants to help singer-songwriters with the business side of their art, e.g., what to watch for when signing contracts and provide a loose coordinating center (much, it seems to me, in the initial spirit of Civic Forum).

His latest musical project consists of a new band called "Dobrá úroda" (Big Crop or Good Harvest). The homemade tape I heard was a curious combination of songs that were pure, and excellently played American blues, along with other songs that had an obvious Slavonic influence. The blues songs sound so



much like the best English or American electric blues guitarists that one begins to doubt the danger of the isolation Merta talks about. The isolation did, however, exist, and Merta is an exception in the degree to which he was able to overcome it.

"The Day After Tomorrow" is a short but upbeat song. At first listen, it sounds like Merta singing about his wife having a baby, but it is in fact about someone who is wondering who shares his view that it's time for political change, and how long will it take before there are enough like-minded people to bring about this change.

#### The Day After Tomorrow

A half-imaginary street  
an invented micro-world  
the artificial light of the moon  
the world of empty hands and sentences

I'm walking across the Bridge of the  
Legions  
and maybe thinking what you're  
thinking, too  
hours leaping down from the Old  
Town clock  
beating out lonely footprints

In my hands a warrant of arrest for  
simple sentences  
that worked their way into my mind  
a half-imaginary demimonde -- you  
and I  
behind every word there lurks  
nonsense

A poisonous viper -- phantasmagoria  
jumps up -- and spits into the wind  
Hey look -- ecce homo -- half a man  
I leave the house alone  
now we are two  
and tomorrow we'll be three



Spoof on the proletariat and peasant on the 100 Kč banknote

How many will we be tomorrow?

(1978)

The reference to the Bridge of the Legions, which during the Communist regime was officially renamed "1st of May", is a reference to the Czech Legionnaires of the First World War, i.e., the last time Czech soldiers fought the Russians. It may seem like an overly disguised allusion, but one of the things that united young people and gave them solace in Gustav Husák's and Miloš Jakeš's Czechoslovakia was, for example, when they went to a Merta concert and saw hundreds, indeed thousands of people, who "were maybe thinking what you're thinking, too." When in November 1989 Merta was singing to at least a quarter-of-a-million like-minded people from the balcony of the newspaper Svobodné slovo on Wenceslas Square, the day after tomorrow had obviously arrived.

Best wishes,

Derek

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