



The Paradoxes of Romanian Pop / Rock / Folk in Communist Romania

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Abstract:

The paper presents a few unique paradoxes that marked the evolution of Romanian pop, rock and folk music alone in the Communist era. Many Romanian pop, rock and folk musicians found an easy way to circumvent censorship by using canonical poets' texts as lyrics. This strategy created an unprecedented blend of experimental musical trends and textbook poems. And this strategy co-existed with the promotion of Western hippie anthems and the broadcast of highly successful Western artists such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Bee Gees, and so on. The paper also makes it clear that self-censorship as a shaping factor of pop music was at least as strong as the official censorship exerted by the authorities, that being courageous or opportunistic ultimately depended on the moral fibre of each artist of those days.

Key words: pop / rock / folk music, lyrics, censorship, self-censorship, literary canon.

The Communist Romania in which I grew up as a child, a teenager and a young man was an uncanny world in many respects.

Rock music, which rapidly gained momentum during the 1960s in communist Romania, was a rather controversial topic, mainly because of the regime's **propaganda** against **Western culture**. In 1971, this fear culminated with the famous July Theses (launched by Nicolae Ceausescu during a National

Conference of the Communist Party). Thanks to its growing popularity, rock music was regulated, but allowed to flourish in Romania, often triggering a generation gap not dissimilar to that of the West or other Eastern European countries.

After a decade of Latin jazz and tango in the 1950s, beat music started to flourish in the early 1960s. The first pop bands founded in Romania were Uranus (founded in 1961, in Timișoara), Cometele (The Comets, 1962, Bucharest), Sfinții (The Saints, 1962, Timișoara), Entuziaștii (The Enthusiasts, 1963, Bucharest). Beat was the label officially attached to the rock music of the 1960s.

All through the 1960s, Romanian rock bands were permitted to sing in English or other foreign languages; moreover, **covers** of Western music were requested by **Electrecord** itself (the only state-sponsored recording company or label), in order to increase disc sales. And yet I shall contradict this piece of information taken from Wikipedia. As early as the late 1960s, the Romanian pop group Coral, nicknamed the Romanian Beach Boys, covered the American band's hit *Top of the World* using as lyrics one of the best-known love poems by the national poet Mihai Eminescu (*De ce nu-mi vii? / Why Don't You Come to Me?*).

In 1971, President Nicolae Ceaușescu delivered the so-called “July Theses” some of whose objectives demanded reorientation of all cultural interests towards national values and treasures. In fact, the July Theses inaugurated a “mini-cultural revolution”; the Romanian rock scene was suddenly confronted with many nascent issues that they had not faced before. Singing in foreign languages was now restricted to other Romance languages, such as French and Italian, or to fellow socialist bloc languages.

State censorship was very careful in its choice of Western songs aired on state radio channels, but looking back at those years one cannot help laughing out loudly when one sees the stupidity of the people in charge of censorship. Here are a few examples of famous blunders in terms of censorship:

– although Western culture was severely criticized and the hippies were regarded as negative examples for Romanian youth, hippie anthems like Scott McKenzie's *San Francisco* and Mary Hopkin's *Those Were the Days* (with its French version

Les Temps des Fleurs) were broadcast for years on – for non-English speaking Party activists they were songs about a beautiful city and the season of flowers!

– although the Beatles had likewise become negative symbols, being frequently used by journalists and fiction writers as a synecdoche for sleazy loafers, no-good youths, their music was massively broadcast in all music-by-request shows. *Yellow Submarine*, *Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da*, *Hello Goodbye*, *Penny Lane*, *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, *Hey Jude*, *Let It Be* and a dozen more songs with innocuous, harmless lyrics were chosen for broadcast. When the Beatles launched *Back in USSR* and *Get Back*, the same non-English speaking censors became suspicious about the message of the respective songs and censored them, thinking they were outspokenly criticizing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia back in the spring of 1968.

Other Beatles songs, like *Revolution*, or post-Beatle songs like George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord* and John Lennon's *Power to the People* and *A Working Class Hero Is Something to Be* were never aired in Communist Romania. While Lennon's *Woman Is the Nigger of the World* was banned in the USA due to the politically incorrect occurrence of the word *nigger* in the title, it was aired for many years on Radio Bucharest with its title abridged to *Femeia (The Woman)*.

While the Beatles held a privileged position in radio shows, alongside the Bee Gees and Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Rolling Stones never had the slightest chance to become a cult group in communist Romania... and I'll let you guess why.

What happened after July 1971 was this: music, in all its forms, whether pop, rock or folk music, was heavily censored by the totalitarian regime. Censorship worked on all levels, banning undesired lyrics, singers, and bands from live performance in halls and clubs, and from broadcast on radio and television.

Censorship had been extremely cautious about lyrics even before July 1971. In 1969, Mondial launched an EP with four songs based on lyrics by canonical Romanian poets: Eminescu – **the national POET**, Minulescu (a 20th century symbolist poet), Goga (a 20th century nationalist poet), and Toparceanu (author of minor, humorous poems). Mondial thus

started a trend of circumventing, eluding censorship by singing lyrics of text-book authors' poems.

Other rock bands, like Phoenix, focused on a mixture of hard rock and ethno-rock; the latter feature was perceptible in the band's lyrics: popular ballads, ballads of outlawry, lyrics borrowed from mediaeval bestiary. Some of the band's lyrics were written by neo-avantgarde poet Serban Foarta, whose ingenuity and versatility helped the band recreate the mood of local history and mythology.

Another important Romanian band, which emerged on the Romanian pop music stage, Sfinx, used the same trick – playing music on ideologically acceptable lyrics by French mediaeval poet Clement Marot (*Languire me fais*), Shelley (*The Cloud*), and Shakespeare (*The Fool's Song from Twelfth Night*), the former in French, the latter in Romanian translations. Their first single record featured the Clement Marot lyrics and lyrics by an early twentieth century poet (also translator of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) St. O. Iosif. Their second record, an EP with four songs, featured a poem by contemporary poet Virgil Carianopol and one by the national poet Eminescu. The first album of the band included lyrics by Shelley and twentieth century Romanian poet Arghezi. The band evolved from pure hard rock and rock ballads to progressive music, so instrumental songs started to replace more traditional songs and text-book lyrics. The launch of their second album was long postponed by censorship. Recorded in 1976 and launched in 1979, it was titled *Zalmoxe* – the name of a half-priest and half-god from ancient Dacian mythology.

Quite paradoxically, while Romanian pop musicians took refuge in the realm of canonical lyrics, Western songwriters otherwise considered hippies, junkies, loafers, and so on, had *their* lyrics translated into Romanian literary magazines of great prestige (*Secolul 20*, *Luceafarul*). *Blowin' in the Wind*, *It's A Hard Rain Gonna Fall*, *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* and other Dylan and Lennon-McCartney lyrics were published as contemporary poetry. The lyrics of Western pop cultural heroes strongly influenced the poetry of a whole generation of Romanian poets, the so-called 1980s "blue-jeans generation". Mircea Cartarescu, the best-known Romanian writer of today made his debut in a collective volume titled *Aer cu diamante*

(*Air with Diamonds*), which was just a clumsy rendering of *the sky with diamonds*.

To conclude, the paradoxes of pop and rock culture in Communist Romania were that

1) while Western culture and its representatives including the Beatles and the flower-power movement were ideologically branded, Western cultural heroes promoted in the literary world as respectable anti-capitalist poets;

2) the Romanian pop musicians were much more cautiously censored than Western artists – thus having to resort to canonical text-book authors.

3) another paradox is that, by using text-book lyrics the pop, rock and folk musicians of the 1970s and 1980s largely and rather unwittingly contributed to the aesthetic education of at least two generations of music fans, who became well-acquainted with a real thesaurus of worthy poetry. In recent years high-school graduates can hardly take their baccalaureate examinations, proving that ignorance has become a general standard of the younger generations.

Shakespeare, Shelley and Clement Marot were not the only foreign poets to enter the repertoire of pop and folk musicians. Goethe (with *Erlkönig*), Heinrich Heine (*Du schönes Fischermädchen*), Victor Hugo (*La Guerre*), Sergey Yesenin also provided lyrics to Romanian musicians.

George Harrison famously sang that *All Things Must Pass*, and he turned out to be quite right. The far-reaching influence of the July theses faded away and in a few years' time it became a matter of one's conscience whether to write one's own lyrics or adopt a servile, subservient attitude and pay lip service to official ideology by singing the lyrics of dead or living poets.

I have drawn up three lists of artists with three different attitudes towards the content and message of their lyrics:

1) First, here is a white list of artists who never accepted any compromise as regards their lyrics, and who wrote their own lyrics throughout their careers. Mircea Florian – the founder, one could say, the Dylan of Romanian folk music – and the father of Romanian alternative rock (with his band Florian from Transylvania) – he has also initiated the first MA course in light designing at the National University of Drama and

Cinematography in Bucharest; Marcela Saftiuc, the queen / Joan Baez of Romanian folk music; Alexandru Andries – an architect who started his career as a folk musician and grew into a complex pop musician; Vali Sterian, a folk and rock musician; and the rock and pop groups FFN (Nameless Band – whose members emigrated to Canada in the mid-1980s), Holograf, Iris, all from Bucharest; and Semnal M, Compact, Celelalte cuvinte (The Other Words), Kripton, Pro Musica, Metropol, Metrock, Riff, and Magneton – all from Transylvania and the Western regions of Romania. (The members of Magneton, a Hungarian band from Transylvania, mockingly titled one of their albums *Jo fiu leszek*, i.e. *I'll Be A Good Boy*.) These were the exceptions, proving that, even in a harsh regime, there could still be survivors among those with a moral fibre. Gil Dobrica, nicknamed the Romanian Otis Redding sang only covers of famous American soul, rhythm and blues, pop, rock and country music hits using his own lyrics to the end of his life.

2) A second, let's say, green list includes the names of musicians who chose to conceal their political allegiances behind the comfortable curtain of dead and living poets. The list is made up of exceptionally talented musicians that produced some of the finest hits of the 1970s and the 1980s using lyrics of undisputed aesthetic value and no ideological shades whatsoever: Tudor Gheorghe (a promoter of symbolist poet Alexandru Macedonski), Nicu Alifantis (a promoter of the most important post-modern Romanian poet Nichia Stanescu), Mircea Baniciu – the former vocalist of Phoenix, who embarked upon a solo career after the other members of the group defected to the West; Doru Stanculescu – yet another talented architect and folk music star;

3) I have also drawn up a black or, for that matter, a brown list of artists who constantly ingratiated themselves with the regime. The pop group Savoy is the undisputed leader as regards boot-licking / arse-kissing. Savoy were the official band of the Ensemble of the Romanian Communist Youth and hence they enjoyed a special treatment. They had the largest number of LP records issued by a pop / rock band before 1989. Their first three albums used lyrics written by Ion Lotreanu (d. 1985), nowadays a completely forgotten writer. He was a very active

pro-Ceausescu journalist and poet in the 1970s, when he worked with the influential weekly *Saptamana cultural* (*Cultural Weekly*). Savoy also used the lyrics of poet Corneliu Vadim Tudor, who, after the fall of Communism, emerged, as the leader of the right wing party Romania Mare (Great Romania).

The choice of many artists of the 1970s pursued a similar pattern. From 1973 to 1985, poet Adrian Paunescu managed a series of weekly events, public performances held at first in in-door halls and then in stadiums under the aegis of his weekly magazine Flacara. The Flacara Circle became a generous umbrella for many talented performers. But curiously, or perhaps not curiously at all, the entrance ticket for most of these performers was playing their acts using Paunescu's lyrics. Thus Paunescu emerged as the best-selling literary figure of the 1970s and 1980s. He was a subtle manager, who, on the one hand, promoted the party's ideological guidelines, and on the other hand, pursued his own financial and populist interests. For fifteen years, dozens of hits aired on Romanian radio stations and heard during live performances were based on Paunescu's lyrics. In 1985, after some unexpected incidents in a stadium, Ceausescu himself, who had started to feel threatened by Paunescu's popularity with the younger generation, ordered the Flacara Circle to be closed down. And if we take a look at the artists that made their debut with Paunescu's circle, we'll instantly notice that on their debut and albums they all used only Paunescu lyrics (this is the case of Mircea Vintila, Dan Chebac, Victor Socaciu, Stefan Hrusca and Vasile Seicaru – outstanding folk musicians who began their careers as artistic slaves that promoted Paunescu's image and cult as the sole important poet of those days). Paunescu succeeded in amassing a large fortune from royalties pouring in from the state record label and from state radio stations. After Paunescu's circle was banned, all these singers abandoned their former protector and guru, and either wrote their own lyrics (like Socaciu), or used other talented author's lines. Dan Verona and George Tarnea were two of the poets who benefited from Paunescu's downfall. Ironically, two of the best lyrics ever written by Paunescu and performed every week in his circle with encores were his

translations of Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* and John Lennon's *Give Peace A Chance*.

I shall mention in passing that scholars interested in gender studies ought to approach the music of Anda Calugareanu, an easy listening star, who turned to folk music in the early 1980s and whose entire repertoire was based on poems by renowned twentieth century and contemporary Romanian poetesses.

In 1984, as an epitome of nationalist cultural policy Ceausescu banned the broadcast of foreign music on Romanian radio stations and on the national television channel. Paradoxically, this helped an entire generation of very talented singers and songwriters to build up careers that lasted long after 1990. The flip side of the coin is that while the quality of music (in terms of composition and interpretation) was more than acceptable, many writers of lyrics kept nourishing Ceausescu's paranoid dream of winning the Noble Prize for Peace. Therefore world peace and saving the planet from nuclear disasters became the obsessive themes of a whole decade. Even the most emancipated rock bands had to perform such a song Here are a few random examples: from 1984, Paul Urmuzescu / Choralis (*Poem de pace / Peace Poem*), Dan Stefanica / Eva Kiss (*Cantec de pace si iubire / A Song for Peace and Love*), from 1985, Holograf (*Viata va invinge / Life Will Overcome*); from 1986, Temistocle Popa / Simion Florentina (*Avem nevoie de pace / We Need Peace*), Marius Teicu / Mirabela Dauer (*O planeta a iubirii / A Planet of Love*), from 1989, Dan Stoian (*Sa iubim planeta albastra / Let's Love the Blue Planet*) – all titles were presented during the Annual Light Music Festivals held in Mamaia, on the Romanian seaside. Peace was allegedly the main problem to be solved in an age of penury, of food, fuel and energy shortage. On an LP from 1984 featuring two rock bands (one on each side of the record), one could hear Barock's *Cantec de pace (Peace Song)* and Kripton's *Camasa pacii (Peace Shirt)*. Peace-mania became a kind of national sport, everybody had to pay tribute to world peace and its champion.

Conclusions

1. Party ideology and censorship were factors that exerted a strong pressure on Romanian pop / rock culture, even decisive factors in the shaping of the respective cultural phenomenon.

2. Paradoxically, one of the positive consequences of the brutal interference of the authorities in the development of pop culture was that a few generations came to be more cultivated, more aware of the humanistic values of Romanian poetry of all times.

3. Censorship, although brutal, often operated at random, even in a chaotic way. The very idea of censorship tested the moral fibre of two generations of musicians: some turned out to be resisting the impositions of the regime, while others chose self-censorship in an opportunistic action, eager to reach a compromise and build their careers on a submissive attitude. As in the case of Communist translations of Shakespeare, self-censorship, the result of psychological terror, was worse, more destructive than censorship itself.