

FOUNDING FATHER OF THE ALTERNATIVE SCENE

Mikoláš Chadima (*1952)

Mikoláš Chadima is among other things a saxophonist. In a rare press interview (MF PLUS, 23. 2. 2007) he described his path to the instrument: “Originally I wanted to play the bass. Four strings – the fewer the better. But in ‘69 I had an incident that concluded with an insult to the head of state and an allied state. When they came for me, and my parents knew nothing as I hadn’t told them anything, my father thought they were after him and threw several of his illegally held pistols in the river. Including a prized Mauser. When he learned my problem was the issue, he got pissed off and decided that as punishment I’d pay the lawyer myself... He never found his pistols. I was hoping to make money hop-picking for a bass, but it went to the lawyer. However, in the autumn of ‘69 I was bowled over by a concert by the band Colloseum at Lucerna and my mind was made up. When my youth savings ended, I bought a saxophone for five thousand.” The “incident” referred to occurred in August 1969 during an anniversary demonstration against the Soviet occupation. Chadim took part and was later prosecuted for “disorderly behaviour”.

The composer, saxophonist, lyricist and journalist Mikoláš Chadima, known as a “founding father” of the Czech alternative music scene, was born in Cheb on 9 September 1952. His father Jiří Chadima was an academic painter and his mother Marta sang at the National Theatre. In 1968 –1972 Mikoláš was an apprentice printer. Two years later he graduated from a secondary school for Svoboda national enterprise workers. He had been drawn to music and art from a young age and learned the essentials of at a People’s School of Art (1972 –1974). He continued at the School of Jazz where he learned improvisation from Karel Velebný and Rudolf Ticháček (1974–1978). He worked as a printer (1968–1974) and later as a labourer at Geodézie, a postman, briefly as a polygraph printing department supervisor and again as a labourer on the construction of the metro. In the second half of the 1970s Chadima became known as a musician, appearing at the Prague Jazz Days festival with the bands Elektrobús and The Jaroslav Jeroným Neduha Rock & Jokes Extempore Band. When Neduha left for exile in the West in the early 1980s Chadima assumed leadership of the group. He also played with Kilhets and The Old Teenagers (later Classic Rock And Roll Band).

Here we must offer a short explanation for younger and foreign readers. In the so-called normalisation period (from roughly 1969), the post-occupation Czechoslovak regime systematically eliminated independent culture. Chadima played in rock groups who were barred from appearing in public. The Communists constantly harassed them, albeit with

different intensity at different times. Bands had to undergo an approval process that involved playing in front of a committee. They could not sing in English or have “vulgar” lyrics and members couldn’t have long hair, etc. Any performance could be and often was banned by the authorities. The musicians had a choice: adapt to the regime’s demands, meaning producing toothless pseudo art, or be in constant conflict with the state. It was out of the question that a band could make a living from free creation. Subsistence was a matter of official whim, not public interest, so many musicians made a living in alternative workers’ professions. Mikoláš Chadima was among those who didn’t adapt as either a musician or citizen, regarding opportunism as one of the vilest aspects of normalisation. In 1979 he was prosecuted for a second time for “disorderly conduct” (a charge he faced for using the word “shit” on stage) and the same year signed, albeit not publicly, Charter 77. A couple of decades later he said: “With hindsight, I regard the creation of Charter 77 as an act of similar significance to the assassination of Heydrich.”

In 1981 Chadima’s group Extempore won the All Stars Band 1980/81 survey in issue 27/28 of Jazz Bulletin magazine (published by the legal but hounded Jazz Section), while in the personality of the year poll he placed second behind the popular Vladimír Mišík. He had previously been harassed by the State Security, who wanted him to become an informer. His passport had been confiscated in 1971 but was unexpectedly returned in 1980. In 1981 he got permission to travel to the UK for a few days. “I sensed it was an unofficial offer of emigration and I went. With (...) Chris Cutler, who found the musicians, we had a concert [at the London venue Three Steps in March 1981. Author’s note] and played the repertoire of my then band Extempore. (...) Then I extended my stay. I knew they’d extend it as they thought I wouldn’t return. On the way back I spent three days in Bonn (...). Of course I weighed it up, as I had an offer from Tim Hodgkinson from the band The Work, but I returned. I’m not the exile type.”

In July that year Extempore played three concerts in Hungary opening for local group Hobbo Blues Band. On his return the authorities again confiscated Chadima’s passport. In September he dissolved Extempore and set up MCH Band. In the summer his signature of Charter 77 was made public. At the turn of 1982 normalisation persecution intensified and for about two years Chadima was completely banned from performing. He began fading from public consciousness and only appeared at unofficial “underground” concerts. As MCH Band’s website states, “in the interest of keeping the band secret we systematically changed names. MCH Band only then existed on cassette tapes on which Chadima, under the label Fist Records, circulated not only his own music but the music of kindred bands. In 1983 he began working closely with poet Ivan Wernisch and that collaboration

continues to this day.” Chadima’s extensive discography of independent releases is accessible at the website mchband.cz.

In the 1980s Mikoláš Chadima worked at the National Technical Museum as a printer and graphic artist (1979–1988) and later as polygraph printing department supervisor (1988–1989). He was a Jazz Section activist (1978–1989) and in 1988 joined the Committee for the Defence of František Stárek, publisher of the samizdat magazine Vokno. He published in samizdat and wrote and self-published the text *Extempore – The Black Book* (1980) and an extensive memoir of the history of the Czech alternative scene *From Requalification to the New Wave, Featuring Old Content* (1985, printed in 1993 under the title *Alternative – From Requalification to the New Wave, Featuring Old Content*).

After a forced absence of many years, Chadima returned to the “legal stage” with MCH Band less than a year before the fall of the Communist regime, appearing at a Concert for Armenia in a sports arena at Prague’s Holešovice in January 1989. His passport was returned to him after many years, allowing the band to play at festival in Wrocław on 5 November 1989. After the revolution, in December 1989, MCH Band played in the West for the first time, at the Permutant 89 festival in Copenhagen. Since 1990 Mikoláš Chadima has been a professional composer and musician. He has brought out a number of records and won several awards (*Album of the Year – the Czech Music Foundation Prize for the LP MCH BAND - Es reut mich f...*, 1991; the Black Point Music Label Award for album of the year for Chadima&Fajt–Průhlední lidé, 1998). He has also worked with many other musicians and appeared as a guest on numerous projects. He also does occasional journalism and is markedly critical of post-1989 political developments, aligning himself with the liberal left: “I was and am of the left. Leftist since time immemorial. Unlike the majority of the nation, who previously obediently voted for the Bolsheviks and are today right-wing since forever. I also like the Greens. Above all I try to not make politics about personalities. If I had to vote according to fondness for party leaders, I wouldn’t go to the polls.”

Text by Adam Drda