

The Americanist Imagination and Real Imaginary Place in Czech Bluegrass Songs

Abstract

During their long history of Americanism Czechs have inscribed "real imaginary" elements of Americana on their environment, laying a foundation for the current interest in bluegrass music. Czech articulations of this imagined "Amerika" in translated, newly-created, and recontextualized bluegrass songs reveals a playful ambiguity. Czechs have cultivated this music and sense of place through Americanisms that blur boundaries between what is American and what is Czech. With humor and hard work, Czech bluegrassers shape a sense of place through their performance of songs in which US music becomes part of the European landscape.

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Introduction: "Bluegrass Tennessee"

Verse 1 Once when hanging around in Tennessee, I first heard that banjo play.
 Music so driving yet beautiful, that I just had to laugh.

Refrain Now that is really bluegrass, only bluegrass sounds that way.

On the wide open plains bluegrass is waving. That's really Tennessee.

Verse 2 Every cowboy and farmer who lives in Tennessee loves this music.
 And that is why all of them, old and young, know how to play it well.ⁱ

When Czechs join in the song "Bluegrass Tennessee" they sing themselves into a place where the "bluegrass is waving." This song's pastoral lyrics contrast with the environment where I first heard it sung, a weekly bluegrass jam at the U Supa Country Saloon in Smíchov, Czech Republic. In 2002 when I made my way from the Bertramka tram stop up Na Čecheličce Street I saw little grass growing in the worn cobblestones and pavement surrounding the coal-darkened 19th century buildings. The scent of urine and glass from broken bottles spread over sidewalks in this run-down industrial suburb stretching southwest from the historical and commercial centers of Prague.

Yet the song's description of bluegrass players who gather to enjoy this music makes sense in gritty Smíchov, as it does throughout the Czech Republic—the music is more common and more deeply rooted in Czech life than many other world regions. The Bluegrass Association of the Czech Republic website (<http://bacr.cz/kapely.php>) lists 180 bands and 37 festivals, far more than any other European country, and more than the numbers listed by the bluegrass association in California, an active bluegrass territory with

four times the Czech population (<http://www.cbaontheweb.org/bands.aspx>). Traces of bluegrass-related music are evident throughout Czech life. Bluegrass-style banjo is a common part of material broadcast by Prague's Country Radio station, a mainstay of workplaces across the country. Groups like Rangers, White Stars, Greenhorns have spread their bluegrass-inflected sound throughout Czechoslovakia since the 1960s. Western imagery and clothing linked to country music and bluegrass—including cowboy boots and hats—are used by many Czechs for special occasions and as everyday wear.

As a domestic part of Central European life, Bluegrass is one of the many choices for musical participation that Czechs can choose. Bluegrass is just one of the many US-rooted popular musics that have global resonance, but its role in Czech life has a particular history and current situation. Czech bluegrassersⁱⁱ—musicians, entrepreneurs, and fans alike—localizations of bluegrass have resolved in distinctive ways the tension between their immediate physical location with the foreignness of their musical articulations of Amerika.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bluegrass, Imagination, and Place

The décor in U Supa struck me with a sense of this Amerika the first time I pushed through its swinging saloon doors: the interior was covered with bits of Americana, from photos of bluegrass stars to a stuffed buffalo head; wagon-wheel chandeliers floated in the cloud of cigarette smoke hugging the ceiling. Still, Bohemian-made beer was served from the taps with all the particular local ceremony of social drinking.

I first heard the song that opens this essay at the Czech language jam at U Supa (there was also an English-language jam at the same pub during that period). The song and

its setting thus reveal a similar mix of American and Czech elements, all held together with a delicate balance of knowledge, suspension of disbelief, and sense of place. The author, bassist and businessman Lubor Hejda, wrote and performed the song with his band NaEx during the bluegrass boom of the early 1990s. My translation of Hejda's lyrics shows a romantic vision of a Tennessee suffused with bluegrass sounds and attractive to Czech ears and imaginations. This kind of song can be dismissed as mere kitsch, but I engage it as an extension of a longstanding and multifaceted tradition that I call Czech Americanism.

While David Gelernter poses Americanism as a quasi-religion of US exceptionalism and historians Kazin and McCartin call for a progressive reclamation of patriotic ideals, I consider Americanism as it takes place abroad, from a bottom-up perspective and with twist of Czech irony. Czech Americanist projects—those which recontextualize Americana as part of Czech life—require a nuanced sense of humor, one that fits Svetlana Boym's characterization of "reflective nostalgia." Boym describes an "ironic and humorous" affective state in which "longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another," a description that resonates with my observations of the ways that Czechs have joined bluegrass songs and sounds with their European environments (49-50). Cultural practices surrounding songs like "Bluegrass/Modrá Tráva" reveal this self-conscious longing for places that never were—a "romance with one's own fantasy," in which participants are aware of the fictions involved in their earnest activity (Boym 27). Bluegrassers like the jam attendees in Smíchov share in a distinctly Czech practice of placing affective, imaginary elements (like the song's imagined version of Tennessee) in their social, built, and natural environments.

Ruth Ellen Gruber's work comparing Jewish heritage sites with country music and Wild West sites in Europe illustrates the flexibility of "real imaginary places," in which "real" and "imagined" elements are sometimes difficult to distinguish (497). Her term emerges from comparisons of "virtually Jewish" locales (such as festivals, restaurants, and other institutions that create Jewish heritage without Jews) and the European imaginary of the Wild West, "where, outside the Wild West show arena, movie sets, or people's imaginations, cowboys never fought Indians or usurped their territory, and stagecoaches never rolled across the desert" (Gruber 497). Gruber finds in Europeans' mythologized play with signifiers of the Wild West a creation of "new authenticities," in which "the inauthentic dream becomes a new, authentic reality"—one of Amerika without Americans (498).

As a musician from the putative homeland of bluegrass in the upland American South, my ethnomusicological fieldwork among Czech bluegrassers is thus a special kind of participant-observation. Though I work with a field-recording rig and with my fiddle, I have focused mainly on understanding how and why my colleagues have taken up this foreign musical form. At the same time they are closely observing how I treat the music as a "native speaker." This aspect of my fieldwork has opened up space for conversations about the ways in which participants (whether Czech, American, or otherwise) create, enjoy, transform, and localize bluegrass.

Bluegrass is one of many rural-based "country" musics that are linked to particular places (both real and imagined) in the United States. Many scholarly and commercial actors have worked to establish a homologous relation between these country musics and their appropriate milieus (Born 31; Middleton 9-10). In his critique of Bill Malone's "Southern hypothesis" for the genesis of country music, folklorist Clifford Murphy argues that

industry stakeholders and scholars have propagated a "myth of Southern authenticity" in music (21-22). Keith Negus illustrates how the ideas of "family, community, and the common people" continue to give the contemporary Nashville country music industry a distinctly "Southern" accent (103-130). As an acoustic and more rustic-seeming form of country music Bluegrass is often considered an exemplar of southern American music, especially in earlier scholarship: in 1984 Robert Cantwell called it "the Old Southern sound," building on Mayne Smith's 1965 description of bluegrass as music "played by...Southern musicians, primarily for a Southern audience [and] stylistically based on Southern musical traditions" (245).

Czech bluegrass- and country-related projects could be considered as somehow diminished because they no longer sound in their place of origin. The existing literature on bluegrass music and geography is largely built on work by George Carney, who uses this kind of homological frame. He maps birthplaces of musicians and the diffusion of some bluegrass-related cultural productions ("Western North Carolina") without questioning the ways that these ideas emerge as a part of the processes of change and movement ("Bluegrass grows" 35-40). I follow Sweet in questioning how bluegrass-related music-making affects lived reality, joining Murphy, Gardner, Haslam, Solli, and Dent in showing how participants outside of the US South create significant meaning through productive reterritorializations of country musics (Deleuze and Guattari 10).

In examining Czech translations of bluegrass through a weaving of song and sense of place, I also provide historical context. In the early 1900s, Czech musicians and outdoor enthusiasts known as "tramps" established practices linking American music, images of the Wild West, and actual Czech places. Tramping, woodcraft, and related activities indicate a

Czech pattern of modifying landscape and sense of place through music making. This process persisted through the Second World War and the rise of the Communist party in 1948, was revitalized by the global folk revival through the second half of the twentieth century, and now flourishes in a variety of forms. With this history providing a background, and a number of key songs providing examples along the way, I consider how Czech cultivation of real-imaginary sounds continues to bridge the local and global. As Czechs write, adapt, and recontextualize bluegrass-related songs they establish a mode of being "Czech" through performance of Americanness.

Background: Tramping

While part of a documentary crew filming in 2011, I spent several hours with Czech banjoist and self-described "tramp" Marko Čermák at his cabin in the Brdy woods outside the village of Hatě, 45 km southwest of the Czech capital city, Prague. Sitting with him outside his cabin, a nearly century-old building named "El Toro," I was struck by a phrase he used to describe the Czech response to Western films and musical sounds imported from the United States in the 1920s: *velká romantika* (a great romance). In the interview segment we used for the film Čermák indicates that dreams sparked by mass-media images of the Wild West later informed Czech interest in bluegrass music. The romance involved in tramping is one of the key motivations for the negotiations and reframings of territory that Czech Americanists undertake.

Off-camera, Čermák spoke with me about the construction of his cabin; Czech tramps built it as a hut named "El Toro" in the 1920s using standard flat lumber. Čermák intimated with a conspiratorial grin that after he bought the property in the 1970s he

covered it in rounded planks so that it would resemble a prototypical American log cabin.^{iv} With this façade he might be drawing from traditions of Czech folk architecture or from media images of American log cabins—or an ambiguous combination of both. Czech tramping practices like Čermák's "cottaging" re-construction established an intentional ambiguity in sense of place and origin (both in natural and built environments) that continues today.^v



[Photo 1 - "Marko Čermák at his cabin, "El Toro," a 1920s cottage with a newer "log" facade. Still from *Banjo Romantika* (dir. Lange, 2015), used by permission.]

Pohunek, Vareka and Symonds, and others have provided a general history of tramping, showing it to be a significant part of Czech culture and a practice distinct from other related such as the German wandervogel and the international Scouting movement.^{vi}

Beginning in the 1910s early tramps sought areas close to urban centers like Prague where they had the freedom to build and adorn objects like "El Toro" that intensified the imaginative elements of scouting, embroidering woodcraft practices with stories of the Wild West from novelists such as Jack London and German "Western" author Karl May, as well as dress and attitudes of early western film cowboys such as those played by Tom Mix.

During the interwar period tramp camps sporting evocative names like "Jukon," "El Paso," and "Westend," (some located in a popular tramp location called Amerika that was located on the Berounka river) filled with Czechs on most weekends. These settlements featured cabins and wigwams constructed with instructions taken from the Native-American-oriented books of Ernest Thompson Seton and other sources for woodcraft lore.^{vii} The Americanism of tramping was not limited to these camps, and saw many other expressions. Music joined the tramping project, and became a way for tramps to celebrate, communicate, and to replicate their outdoor experiences in other settings.

Czech musicologist Josef Kotek states that tramp singing became one of the most widespread Czech popular music forms in the interwar period of 1918-1938 (158). He also describes early tramp singing as globalized and eclectic, naming the US barbershop style as a source for tramp close-harmony singing (Kotek 168-173). Featuring a potent mix of globally popular music of the day (syncopated dance music, fretted stringed instruments like the guitar, Hawaiian guitar, mandolin, and banjo, etc.) tramp songs grew in popularity and were marketed in recordings, sheet music, and productions like *The Good Tramp* Bernášek, a film directed by Karel Lamač in 1933.

During the interwar era, Czechs could consume and reproduce US culture in ways that were difficult under the restrictive rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1918,

and in decades that followed. During the 1938-1945 Nazi occupation and after the Communist ascendancy in 1948 authorities "attempted to control tramp camps, arresting those who were thought to be imitating the American way of life" (Symonds and Vareka 172). Under pressure, tramp groups centered on their community circles) "rather than a geographical location," which "served to strengthen group ties and allowed a more fluid interaction with the landscape, placing less emphasis on visiting set locations."

Songs were a similarly fluid means of expressing Americanism, especially in the postwar era, when tramp-related music's Americanism blended with nostalgia. Jehlička and Kurtz indicate the way that woodcraft culture and related tramping activities were a part of the Czech response to the period of Communist Party primacy after 1948:

Because of its everyday presence and universal familiarity, it played an often-overlooked yet pivotal role in maintaining the distinctive character of Czech society during the decades of the communist regime. ... with its heyday in the Czechoslovak inter-war period, [woodcraft] enabled [Czechs] to invoke and draw with nostalgia on the memories, experiences, and myths of the pre-communist period (Jehlička and Kurtz 326).

It was during this turn of nostalgia in the 1950s and 60s that Czechs like Marko Čermák first heard bluegrass music, finding in this form a more potently American musical expression. Mediated by radio, records, and the burgeoning global folk movement—and imbued with Americanness that could be potentially anti-Communist—bluegrass quickly became a new musical expression for Czech Americanists, one that had musical similarities to Tramp music. As Čermák and other Czechs adapted their guitars, banjos, and mandolins

to the musical techniques and textures of bluegrass, they translated tramp music-making into a form that would gain new meanings in the decades to follow.

Singing (to) a landscape: The Greenhorns' "Oranžový Expres"

Marko Čermák first heard bluegrass during the 1950s from shows produced by the American Forces Network (AFN) studios in Munich, West Germany. Čermák recalls hearing "bluegrass as it should be" played by Earl Scruggs and other banjoists—likely the daily afternoon show "Stickbuddy Jamboree" in which AFN deejay "Wagon Wheel Willy" spun thirty minutes of "...country and western RE-corded music."^{viii} As a listener, and then a fan, Čermák became part of the network of audiences in the United States who in this same time were inspired to reproduce the sounds of the five-string banjo and the bluegrass lineup that they heard on radio broadcasts.^{ix}

It is significant that Čermák credits his first experience with the music to Earl Scruggs, and not one of the other leading voices of bluegrass in the 1950s-60s, for example Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, or the Osborne Brothers. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs became the most visible representatives of bluegrass outside of the American South, thanks to their initiative in participating in the folk revival, in their role on the Beverly Hillbillies television show (first aired 1962) and because of their contribution of the tune "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" to the soundtrack of the 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde* (Rosenberg 250-266).

Czechs who fell in love with bluegrass music through hearing it on the radio could not easily pick up the music themselves, however. The first obstacle was accessing information on the music and how to play it. Marko Čermák recalls that he first wore his

fingerpicks (picks he made himself from a potted meat can) backwards before meeting American banjoist after Yellin's performance in Prague. In a rare instance of contact with instruction and equipment, Yellin gave Čermák a new set of picks and corrected his technique (Čermák 19). In spite of a variety of obstacles these musicians started bands and began performing in the later years of the 1960s, cultivating wider interest in bluegrass among Czech audiences^x

Czechs who had been bitten by the bluegrass bug worked to transform the music into a medium that others in their local scenes could enjoy. The existing practices Americanism honed by tramps and dispersed through Czech culture through multiple generations offered fertile soil for bluegrass. Using landscape imagery to blur the boundaries between "Czech" and "American" is one way that members of Čermák's band the Greenhorns worked to localize songs like "Orange Blossom Special."

Singer and songwriter Výčital's textual translation of this song, "Oranžový Expres," continues the transformation of a song with origins in Florida in the 1930s but with a trail of changing meanings (Hansen; Noles). While bluegrass luminary Bill Monroe produced an influential version of the song in 1941 and other groups recorded it in the ensuing decades, the Greenhorns clearly modeled their version of the song from Johnny Cash's recording. Cash, like Flatt and Scruggs, was one of the few US artists whose work was accessible through Czech media. The 1972 Supraphon set "Country & Western" included six 45-RPM records that featured Scruggs and Cash along with Marty Robbins, Johnny Horton, and Czech band Country Beat Jiřího Brabce.

Cash's "Special," featured on his *At Folsom Prison* live album (Columbia, 1968), replaces the novelty-virtuosic fiddle of most bluegrass-type versions with harmonicas and

saxophone. In a spoken comic interlude Cash also inserts one of his trademark loner/outsider figures: a tramp riding the rails. The Greenhorns' version as presented on the LP record *Greenhorns '71* (Panton 11 0271, 1971) includes both of these elements, adapted for Czech situations through blurring of landscape.

"Oranžový Expres"^{xi}

- Verse 1 All I can see of my birthplace ranch is the chimney and stable, (2x)
 that express train the color of oranges is taking me, so good-bye.
- Verse 2 It's like the lights of the casinos always luring me in.
 I see the light of the brakeman's lantern, sparks fluttering all around.
 When I hear that orange express train whistling in my ear.
- Interlude "Hello, where you headed, tramp?" "Dunno."
 "To New York?" "Dunno."
 "Or to Nashville?" "Dunno,
 it's enough for me to hear
 those crossties rattling doo dah doo dah doo dah..."
- Verse 3 Sitting in the coal car looking out over the countryside,
 I grab that bottle of Tokaj in my tramping sack
 and the song of this orange train I sing to the landscape.

Verse 4 I can't see the chimney and stable of my birthplace ranch anymore,
(2x)

 this express train the color of oranges is off to New York, good-bye.

In Výchital's text we learn more about the main character and his setting than in Cash's version; we hear about the brakeman's lantern, the coal car where the tramp hides, and his tramping sack. Typically a tramp's bag would be an usárna or ueska, a United States military backpack (or an imitation) with its American origins printed on the canvas fabric: "US," conveying a sense of Americanness. Note that the bottle here is not of whiskey or rum—spirits referred to in other Greenhorns texts and in many US songs. The tramp in this song reaches for a bottle of wine from the Slovak/Hungarian Tokaj region known for its sweet vintages, indicating that the train, the tramp, the sack, and the wine are in Central Europe. While the mention of a "ranch" and a "stable" could be located in any rural landscape, the Greenhorns suggest that their version of the train is running on Czech rails.



[Photo 2 - "Usárna backpack in Prague military store, 2016. Photo by the author."]

The Czech Television promotional film for this song reveals the humor that helps connect the floating set of "country" signifiers and sounds to Czech places. A sense of ironic distance is evident in the mock-heroic posturing of singer Mirek Hoffman during the second verse. The comic elements multiply and intensify in the next verse as, instead of reaching for a bottle of wine, Hoffman is handed a bottle of milk. He drinks with gusto, and then heightens the humor by using a saxophone-shaped kazoo to mime part of the instrumental solo that precedes the last verse. Hoffman's tongue-in-cheek presence indicates that the group is aware of the in-between-ness of their performance, and the fact that their western outfits and banjo picking might be out of place in the Czech countryside. As in Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, humor helps smooth paradoxes in imagining place and belonging. Czech audiences would appreciate the irony that Hoffman subtly telegraphs while eyeing the milk bottle: it would be unusual for a Czech (a citizen of a country that consistently rates near the top in global surveys of per-capita alcohol consumption) to eschew alcohol for milk.^{xii}

Working as officially recognized musicians during the Soviet-led "normalization" of Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Prague Spring, the Greenhorns were subject to censors and apparatchiks who tightened censorship, closed music clubs, and controlled the conditions of performances (Elavsky 103). The group's playful use of Americanisms allowed them to speak of tramping—and imply Americanness—in ways that wouldn't trigger an official backlash. Everyday Americanists were sometimes questioned or even beaten by police reacting to the anti-regime implications of tramping. Longtime tramp and bluegrass lover Lilka Pavlak once told me of being hassled by police because she was carrying an *usárna* backpack on a hiking trip. The Greenhorns themselves were not completely immune to

such official pressure: In 1972 they changed their name to Zelenáči with passage of laws limiting the public use of the English language.^{xiii}

Bluegrass music's "driving time" remains in the musical mix behind the gestures and issues surrounding this song, indicating travel and transition—and evoking a sense of risk and possibility (Rosenberg 47). Part of the reception of "Oranžový Expres" by Czech audiences in the 1970s would have been the unarticulated reality that the tramp is not actually going to New York. Few Czechs held passports during Normalization, and fewer were able to travel to the West.^{xiv} It is more likely that this trip takes its singing narrator to an established tramp gathering point in Česká Kanada or a tramp osáda in the Brdy woods. From the train, the Czech tramp character sees a landscape he knows so intimately that it becomes an audience for his song. While the tramp has a goal, his destination doesn't really matter to him as long as the cross-ties keep thumping past beneath him and the countryside around him can be imagined through Americanist words and sounds. As with "Bluegrass / Modrá Tráva," the point is not the actuality of the imagined place (or here, the imagined journey) but the evocation of a dreamed-up place shared through musical experiences. As for tramps, the elision of Czech and American elements through evocation of a sense of place is a part of meaningful cultural production.

Ambiguous Landscapes: Zdeněk Roh, "When the grasses grow so well"

I had been playing in his band for some time before Zdeněk Roh asked if I could help edit some of his English-language songs. I was happy to help – it was a chance for me to extend the participant-observation I was undertaking, playing fiddle in his group Roll's Boys at jams, rehearsals, and festival performances. Roh's English abilities are roughly

similar to mine in Czech– strong in verbal ability due to exposure to informal conversation more than formal reading and writing. My fluency in Czech allowed me to aid Roh in finding appropriate turns of phrase in translating Czech idioms into English that would make sense in a bluegrass song.

One of the most successful songs that Roh had me look over is "When the grasses grow so well," a piece he was preparing for the album that we recorded with Roll's Boys in 2008. This song shows that efforts to reframe bluegrass within Czech landscapes have continued after the end of Communist Party primacy in 1989, the separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, and after 2004, when Czechs joined the European Union. "Grasses" includes a more nuanced sense of actual landscapes, playing on US musical and textual tropes in establishing an in-between space that is both "bluegrass" and "Czech."

Roh created the song in a traditionalist bluegrass form, featuring two-part fiddle harmony, Scruggs-style banjo, and lyrics that include many of the tropes common to classic bluegrass texts: the trauma of dislocation, the desire to return home, the value of land and nature. A devotee of bluegrass and country music, Zdeněk carefully salted his tale of a wandering roustabout with landscape images that culminate in a homecoming to the mountain where grasses flourish. Borrowing knowingly from various imaginaries of American rural music, Zdeněk references both the putative home of the country blues ("the Delta") as well as the upland territory often associated with bluegrass-type music.

"When the Grasses Grow So Well"^{xv}

Chorus Born on the highland, never seen the delta flood,
 raised in the country away from big city mud.

Where have I been for such a long time? Who the heck can tell,
when the grasses on the mountain grow so well.

Verse 1 The captain came to me one day and said "Son, are you ok?"
 "You look homesick boy and your brown eyes now seem to fade
away."

I said "Thanks," and "Goodbye pals, nice to meet you all,"
when the blue breeze from the mountain gave its call.

Verse 2 It ain't easy to find my way back home 'cause I've traveled for so long.
 Some places made me stay a while but for a lifetime it was wrong.
 I'm going up high, that uphill climb will make me cry,
 for the last years round the world have been a lie.

As with "Oranžový Expres," there is little specificity to the landscape beyond the most generalized features. Nonetheless, landscape plays a central evocative role in the drama of the song. It is not the pull of social bonds that draws Roh's narrator home, but the memory of a landscape and the greenery that grows so well there. Natural images and processes are paramount: the city is placed in opposition to the countryside not by cars, bustle, or ill-mannered residents, but by the degradation of soil into "big city mud."

Zdeněk Roh explained that when he wrote the song, he imagined the "highlands" as the Vysočina region where he lives near Jihlava, the regional capital:

First of all most of my lyrics were influenced or exactly seen in my dreams, this one too and despite that I was born in a city—not large one, you know Jihlava—I have always dreamed of being born in [the] country (Roh).

Before he was able to move out of his apartment in Jihlava (a small panelák space of 2-3 rooms where I first visited with him in 2003), his main access to the countryside of the highlands region was through scouting expeditions. Tramping expeditions and other Americanist recreational activities were his way of imagining and engaging with the countryside, activities complemented by bluegrass music making after Roh took up the banjo as a teenager upon hearing the music at home and in his peer circles. After an abortive stint as a student of economics in Prague, Roh settled down to work as an accountant for his father's electronic manufacturing firm in Jihlava, making time in the evenings to build instruments and perform with bluegrass groups. Along the way he has actualized his longing for the rural homeplace he never had: He currently owns property in a small rural village with views onto a landscape of grass-covered rolling hills.

Roh's recasting of this countryside in "When the Grasses Grow So Well" is not as overt as those of "Bluegrass/Modrá Tráva" or Oranžový Expres. Though a tramp himself, Roh does not include Czech tramping in his song's story; in fact, he erases as much as possible all traces of Czechness from the song. He tells his story in English and in the recorded version sings the lead vocal line himself, taking on an American accent in his articulation of "mountain" and "who the heck can tell." He asked me to play the introductory instrumental line on fiddle to feature my musicality in the mix. Where the sense of place in "Oranžový Expres" allowed Czech audiences to imagine themselves within an American song, "Grasses" articulates its Czechness through Americanist fluency.

Roh's refined sense of lyrical and musical idioms of bluegrass as well as his skills as a performer indicate how far Czechs have come in their engagement with bluegrass since Marko Čermák constructed his own banjo and fingerpicks from found materials. Since his father is a bluegrass fan, Roh grew up hearing groups like the Greenhorns, as well as recordings of US bluegrassers. A member of what Adrian Otoiu calls the "liminal generation," Roh grew up during the 1989 "velvet revolution" and the dismantling of Communist apparatus. Like the Romanian writers that Otoiu describes, Roh has "cultivated hybridity and double-codedness...exploring the potential for ambiguity offered by the very nature of fictional narrative" (Otoiu 105). The blurring of place central to Czech Americanism allows Roh's song to speak as as a bluegrass song and as a statement of Czechness. In the postsocialist Czech Republic the connections between bluegrass and Czech places are at the same time more pervasive and not as immediately evident.



Real Imaginary Outcomes

[3 - " Zdeněk, Zdenka, Anička, and Franta Roh at their tipi in the Czech countryside of the Vysočina highlands.]

Czech parents have long sought cleaner air for their children and the Czech school system sends elementary school classes for a week or more each year to "school in nature"

where they breathe in country air and learn to identify wildlife and plants. Zdeněk Roh carries out a Czech Americanist version of this practice, spending several weeks each year with his family and their informal "tribe" of fellow enthusiasts in an encampment in the countryside near his home. The group enjoys activities typical to Czech indianists: sleeping in teepees, crafting handmade items from bone, beads, and leather (Kalshoven). In this atmosphere of Americanism, banjos and tramp songs blend with nature study, woodcraft, and games adapted from books on Native American life. Though this part of Roh's life is in some ways a vacation from his office job at his father's firm, it also takes on a formative moral place in his life:

...I've tried to live like that, like Indians, after the patterns that Ernest Thompson Seton gave us in his books. So this was my first meeting the American life. ... it was just ... child's play, it was not anything about real life. But I wanted to live like that anyway. ... it gave me the image of the proper life, where the good thing beats the bad thing. So it was all situated... all my ideas about being right and living the life like that have been situated in the United States (Bidgood 85).

I conducted this interview with Zdeněk in the summer of 2004 just following the Czech Republic vote to join the European Union. After I turned off my recorder that day, talk turned to that vote and Zdeněk joked that—following his imaginative/idealizing play in the Czech landscape, he would rather be part of the "United States of Europe" – a statement that makes sense considering the legacy of Czech Americanism and the United States' support of Czechoslovakian nationhood in 1918 and at other junctures since (Unterberger).

Following Pells, I consider Roh's Americanist projects not as submission to cultural invasion per some models of "Americanization" but rather an interaction with active motions of transmission and reception (Pells 204-262). I have also begun to consider biological metaphors: bluegrass does seem part of a process of cultivation in which foreign species are naturalized and made productive in a new environment. A counterpoint to this line of reasoning emerged during my visit with a group of Czech musicians who relate their bluegrass-related musical projects to local folklore to build an actual connection with their home region.

In August of 2009 I met with members of a band from Rakovník, a small town about 50 kilometers northwest of Prague. Rakovníckej Potok, (Rakovník Creek, named for the stream that flows through the town) is a four-piece band that specializes in performance of "old time" US string band repertory and style. I had been eager to meet with this group since seeing them in a YouTube video in 2006, as they were one of the few Czech bands devoted to US old-time string band music, a form distinct from but closely related to bluegrass.^{xvi}

In explaining why they chose old time over bluegrass, the members of the group used the word *zemitý*, an adjective derived from the Czech noun *země*, meaning land or earth. This music is more grounded – but where? I argue that in their recreation of this *zemitý* music this group can resolve contradictions between the geographic origin of their chosen music and the circles in which it is played and enjoyed.

Members of Rakovníckej Potok described how they have learned many songs from songbooks, tablatures, and streaming video sites. They play this foreign repertory in local performances in their town and its surrounding region, where their audience doesn't speak

much English. Members of the group follow the lead of the Greenhorns, re-texting many common old time songs with Czech lyrics. Sometimes they follow the original idea; guitarist Libor Stěpanek's version of the song "Cluck old hen," Stará Slepice, hews closely to the original, centering its text on a chicken that hasn't laid an egg since last spring.

Other songs reflect a more intense and self-reflective remapping of melody and words. The group's blending of the Uncle Dave Macon (and Pete Seeger) showpiece "Cumberland Mountain Deer Race" with the Czech folkloric song "Holka Modrooka" creates a new performance that they label with their Czech translation of the American title, resituating the story on the banks of the Cumberland river, "Lov jelenů na břehu řeky Cumberland." Like many Czech bands Rakovnickej Potok have listed their entire repertory on their website (<http://www.rakovnickej-potok.cz/Pisne.php>), with texts, recordings, and stories about song. In the description of "Lov jelenů," the web page states that "while the Americans present the song as originally an American folk tune, we know our own [song when we hear it]!" While grafting their version of old time music into Czech usage through linguistic translation, Rakovnickej Potok also imagines ways that the American material is at its core already Czech.

Amerika today

The common Czech term for the United States, Amerika, is a linguistic insulator that helps Czechs define the imagined and idealized territory that has for generations served as the generative heart of Americanist recreation. Amerika is the real-imaginary space where one would drink tokaj on the Orange Blossom Special, erect teepees with birch saplings harvested from a Vysočina highlands forest, or sing "Cluck old hen" in Czech.

In the evolving Czech market economy competing imagined versions of Amerika circulate. Czechs who interact with the songs I have highlighted in this essay have visions different from those spread by the German-owned supermarket chain Lidl, for instance. In a Lidl supermarket advertising circular from the summer of 2011 readers are encouraged by text and graphics (that include a large image of a woman wearing a cowboy hat) to visit the store for "American Week" because their line of Mcennedy products can show us "how the USA tastes!" As a sometime consumer of Mcennedy products, I can attest that they do not taste like the US products they seek to reproduce, but that is not the main point. Czech productions of bluegrass represent much more palatable engagements with cultural elements drawn from the United States. Yet it is useful to consider how these processes remain in tension with Lidl's Americanist campaign. The process of translating US elements into Amerika is much more involved than buying a canned product.

Banjoist Marko Čermák proposed an even more critical version of this idea when I spoke to him in 2008. Sitting outside his cabin, he explained to me why he has chosen not to travel to the United States, even when invited to receive a special award from the International Bluegrass Music Association in 2007. He told me that he didn't wish to see the countryside of highway-exit hotels he has heard about from fellow Czechs who have made the trip; he prefers to continue cultivating his "beautiful, dreamed-up, unreal Amerika."

This Amerika is one that Čermák has had a major role in shaping, not only for himself, but for many Czechs—he has called himself a "professional romantic" (Lukeš). In addition to his work as a musician, Čermák is an illustrator for a popular series of childrens' adventure stories by author Jaroslav Foglar and is also landscape painter; he

tirelessly blends fantasy and truth in his images of the Czech countryside. Sitting with me outside his cabin in the Brdy woods he explained: "I am surrounded by this America; America is everywhere here" (Čermák "Personal Interview"). With these last words, Čermák gestured around with his arm, imbuing the forest around the table where we sat with real-imaginary significance.

This essay is in some ways an apologia for people like Čermák and Roh, and for the whole Czech enterprise of Americanism. I have worked for years to understand why they recreate US bluegrass in the Czech Republic. While I explain the complexity, interconnectedness, and historical grounding of Czech bluegrass projects, however, I also open them to critical examination. Further research could shed light on how bluegrass helps Czechs to reinscribe boundaries of nation, ethnicity and gender, for example.

This study also indicates the importance of an ethnomusicological perspective on the sense of place that arises through music making. Music is a social process that becomes real in the spaces between people. Doreen Massey's (140) description of space articulated in time—with spaces negotiated by competing senses of time—illuminates Schutz's conception of musical participation as the "mutual-tuning-in relationship" of simultaneity (Schutz 161). Participants imagine themselves in or out of simultaneity not only within the organized time of sound, but in the resonant architecture of space. Thinking of that resonating space as a place requires an additional step, however: we must take into account the histories, meanings and beliefs that shape participants' perceptions and their *romantika*. Our understanding of musical sound gains greater depth when we consider these affective territories where sound relationships take place.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Translation from Czech to English by the author. I reconstructed my Czech version of this song from a version by the self-declared author, Lubor Hejda, with some verses taken from versions I found posted on band and songbook websites, and those I remember from jam performances during my fieldwork.

ⁱⁱ Bluegrasser is a US concept with a Czech counterpart, bluegrassák. This emic term reflects' the ethnomusicological emphasis on music as a process, per Small (1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ The proper term for the US is the actual translation of the full title (Spojené Státy Ameriky) which I have heard used, but much less frequently than the abbreviated Amerika.

^{iv} "El Toro" is part of the cottage settlement Údolí hadru; in his 2010 interview with Lukeš Čermák states that the cabin was built in 1926.

^v Melinda Reidinger's dissertation (2007) is one of the few English language examinations of the Czech practice of cottaging, which is not limited to tramp or other Americanist practices.

^{vi} For more on the wandervogel movement see Williams (107-146). Ethnologist Jan Pohunek distinguishes Czech tramping as Americanist: "Wandervogel was (and still is) a youth romantic hiking scout-like movement officially founded in 1901. It differs from tramping in terms of its slightly higher level of organization and the fact that it draws its inspiration from German mythology and history rather than from the American Wild West" (Pohunek 32).

vii Jehlička and Kurtz state that Seton's books were translated to Czech in larger numbers than to any other language (312). One example is Seifert's translation of Seton's *Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*.

viii Marko Čermák describes his experience hearing bluegrass on US military radio in an interview segment of the film *Banjo Romantika* (dir. Shara Lange, 2015). Wagon Wheel Willy is featured in a segment of *The Big Picture: The Story of American Forces Network* (Armed Forces Network, 1962).

ix Jamieson relates that he had to pull over into the ditch, he was so amazed when he first heard Bill Monroe's band on his car radio (53). John Hartford's song "On the Radio" described how he "bounced off-a all four walls" hearing early bluegrass-style broadcasts; John Hartford, *Good Old Boys* (Rounder CD 0462, 1999).

x Information on the banjo and other aspects of bluegrass remained difficult for Czechs to access until the 1989 ouster of the Communist Party. Earl Scruggs' banjo instruction book and other key items were eventually introduced to the Czech scene, along with recordings. Several older Czechs have told me that the 1968 Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia led to more access to information, as emigres in the US or Canada could send materials to friends still in the Czech lands. Local sources such as Marko Čermák's own 1975 instruction book *Pětistrunné Banjo* (Five-Stringed Banjo) later emerged to help spread techniques and repertory.

xi Text by Jan Vyčítal, this translation by the author.

xii Barrett's discussion of the 1964 Czech western "Limonadový Joe" presents another example of the irony of Czech temperance on screen. Hall's account of Czech beer drinking culture provides an introduction to common Czechs practices of social alcohol consumption.

xiii Elavsky explains that artists who did not comply could "lose the right to perform [or] could be forced into ... occupations such as street sweeping, coal stoking or sanitation collection" (Elavsky 103).

xiv Ironically, the Greenhorns gained access to the West, traveling to West Germany for performance gigs, as Marko Čermák explains in interview segments in *Banjo Romantika* (dir. Shara Lange, 2015).

xv Words and Music by Zdeněk Roh, used by permission.

xvi "Old Time" here refers to a musical practice similar to bluegrass but more influenced by the 20th century folk revival. Old time enthusiasts vary widely, but tend to focus on pre-bluegrass string band repertory from a variety of rural regions; in their musical projects they often express a desire to resist commercialization, a back-to-the-land aesthetic, and an ethos of inclusivity. Wooley provides a useful sketch of several waves of old time string band revival that have happened since the 1960s.