

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ABSTRACT

The contribution provides a brief overview of the development of Czech hip hop subculture. Focusing on the events and personalities of its formative years beginning with 1989, the article gives an insight into each of Czech hip hop's elements. Looking at the forms of adoption and adaption of western influences via TV and radio broadcasts, the article explores the early years of rap, breaking and beatbox following the contributions of its main protagonists. Even though Czech Republic is considered racially homogeneous, the article also touches upon the contribution (or lack thereof) of the Roma artists. As is the case of many countries around the world, Czech rap music is perceived a masculine domain, which is reflected in the relative absence (or invisibility) of female hip hop artists.

KEYWORDS

rap
hip hop
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breaking
subculture
cultural translation
gender
Roma

As is the case of many subcultures outside the United States, hip hop arrived to the Czech Republic in its mediated form. Although young people were inspired by the elements of hip hop before the Velvet Revolution, the Czech hip hop subculture started to fully form after 1989. 'Jižák jižák', a demo song recorded by a group called Manželé in 1984 is considered the first Czech rap song. Lesík Hajdovský, the front man of the group, heard Grandmaster Flash's 'New York New York' on a West German radio broadcast. Intrigued by the beat and the recitation of the lyrics, Manželé created an ode to the 'South City', one of Prague's largest neighbourhoods, which makes this part of Prague the birthplace of Czech hip hop (see also Oravcová 2016).

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NOTABLE RECORD LABELS

- BiggBoss
- Blakkwood
- Million Plus
- Ty Nikdy

NOTABLE WEBSITES

- <http://www.bbarak.cz>
- <http://www.cream.cz>
- <http://www.fullmoonzine.cz>
- <http://www.phatbeatz.cz>

NOTABLE COMPILATIONS

- *Lyric Derby 1, 2*
- *East Side Unia 1, 2, 3*
- *20Ers*

At that time one could hear rap music on German and Polish radio stations. After 1989 the source of inspiration came from MTV, especially *Yo! MTV Raps*, from people that were able to travel to the West, and the radio DJs that were playing hip hop on Czech air. One of the first hip hop radio show hosts was Miča Viktořík, working at now defunct Prague's Golem Radio 90.3 FM. Between 1991 and 1995 each Wednesday he would introduce an 'hour of rap'. Viktořík is also a founding member of J.A.R., a group that used rap in their music production at that time, but along with Rapmasters these bands were considered inauthentic. They generally used rap as a form of expression, however, they did not adopt hip hop as a lifestyle with all its notions of authenticity, or, as Vaclav Walach (2010) put it, as a subcultural identity including a certain attitude. Radio 1 also has a long tradition of rap-related shows hosted by the legends of Czech hip hop, among others DJ A to the K and his *Ill Flava Jams* show then shortened to *Ill Flava* hosted by DJ Richard and later on joined by DJ Enemy and renamed to *Soundbomb*. Rap music is currently a part of (almost) every radio station's programming, whether in daily rotation of rap songs or specialized hip hop shows. However, the only Czech radio station focusing only on hip hop and R&B is Radio SPIN, established in 2007.

Rap was not the only element that made its way to the Czech Republic. Early rap groups have a close connection to the graffiti scene. The very first graffiti artist, Maniac, was decorating the streets of Ostrava back in 1987. The legendary artist Sifon, a member of the Bungle Clan graffiti crew founded a group called WWW and in 1993 they released the first rap music video 'Noční můra' ('Nightmare'). Sifon, who mixes visual and vocal arts in his shows, was one of the first artist to introduce beatbox to the audience and the group WWW is still active today with their music production labelled as alternative hip hop. In 1993 Peneři strýčka homeboy (later going by PSH) released their first album *Peneřina Těžká Dřina* (which can be loosely translated as 'Being a bum is a hard job'). In 1998 Vladimír 518, one of the most influential artists today, joined Orion and became a member of the group. The history of Czech graffiti is covered in Martina Overstreet's book *In Graffiti We Trust* (2006), where besides the photos and stories told by the graffiti pioneers you can also find a seven-page English summary.

The first breakers were inspired by *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* movies. In 1985 singer Jiří Korn released a song called 'Break Dance' and performed it on national TV. Korn claimed he was fascinated by the fresh aesthetics while he was not familiar with the cultural background of the element. One of the first breakers was Petr Ježek, a Czech breaking champion who founded the Crazy Breakers project and danced also for President Havel. Among the first breaking crews was Da Live Broadcast. Back then the dancers would carefully watch breaking videos from the West and copy the routine. Once they knew everything by heart they started to create their own styles. Today almost every dance studio and/or after-school programme offers lessons in so called 'hip hop dance' due to its popularity among the youth.

During the 1990s Czech hip hop subculture was a rather small and close-knit community. And then came Chaozz. Signed to PolyGram, their first album released in 1996 was a best-selling album even up until a decade ago. With singles like 'Policijééé' ('Police'), 'Televize' ('TV') and 'Planeta pice' ('The Planet of Apes') entering popular music charts, Chaozz brought hip hop to the farthest corners of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The group was criticized by other hip hop heads for merely imitating American style. Kato (formerly

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known as Deph), the front man of the now defunct Chaozz, is considered the best lyricist in Czech rap music. He is currently performing with his new group, Prago Union.

Czech hip hop would not ever be what it is today without a group of hip hop enthusiasts behind the brand called Bbarák. The group led by Affro released the first hip hop magazine (1999, printed in July 2001); organized first events such as Hip Hop Foundation, monthly event that combined battles in every element of hip hop with live performances of Czech rappers; had the first hip hop label called Bbrekordy; the first hip hop shop offering everything from cans and vinyls to hip hop clothes; and in 2002 organized the first Hip Hop Kemp, which CNN ranked among world's top 50 summer music festivals in 2012. Affro himself was in charge of the dramaturgy of the first hip hop TV shows on music station Óčko; hosted his own radio show; and still organizes legendary Boombox events bringing the biggest names in hip hop, old and new school to Prague.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century three volumes of *East Side Unia* compilation and two volumes of *Lyrík Derby* represented the best hip hop groups in Czech rap. In 2001 Indy & Wich released their debut album *My 3* ('Us three') and Naše Věc, a crew from Brno, released *Blázni jsou ti* ('Fools are those'). While these groups relied on storytelling, wordplay and representation of everyday life of young men in the Czech Republic, the situation changed by 2004 when Supercroo released *Toxic Funk*. Before Supercroo what mattered was the content of the songs with the same old topics being recycled. When Hugo Toxxx and James Cole first came up as Supercroo, they changed the game as they put emphasis on the form, the delivery and flow. The group also relied on provocative lyrics full of curses and rather cruel jokes aimed at the mainstream popular music and Czech popular industry icons.

Jaro Cossiga is another important artist that shaped Czech hip hop in the fields of beatbox and hip hop theatre. Formerly a graffiti artist and a rapper (member of a group Uzun Arac) Cossiga joined forces with three times world champion in Electric Boogie, Freaky Jesus and together they started performing. In 2003 they became members of the Archa Theater company and travelled the world. In 2006 Cossiga put together a crew of six people and went on a 'beatbox expedition' to explore the roots of hip hop culture in New York City. There they connected with the underground crew and recorded *Hop'n'Nob*, an album featuring New York emcees and Czech beatboxers establishing a bridge of collaboration between NYC and Prague. Thanks to this connection, the two of the longest running events in NYC now have a Czech branch: Freestyle Mondays (open mic with a live band) and End of the Weak (the worldwide emcee challenge). Cossiga then joined his forces with DJ and producer Enemy, with whom he opened a Royal Duck studio, which offers workshops in beatbox and work with Ableton.

In 2006 two major labels were established. Vladimír 518 co-founded Bigg Boss label taking under his wings what was considered the mainstream of Czech hip hop. The label also focuses on different book projects related to Czech music subcultures, architecture or design. The label was closed by the end of 2021. Another important label that is considered to represent the 'real' hip hop is Ty Nikdy with a roster of artists including the front man Idea, Rest, DJ Fatte, MC Gey and Paulie Garand to name a few.

During the two decades since the release of the first rap albums, Czech rap music was divided in different sub-genres. Besides the mainstream rap focusing on the party life and broad appeal there is the underground that is sticking

with the boombap style of the nineties. Horrorcore rap also has a large following in the Czech Republic with interpreters such as Řezník or Masový Wrazi. The general public became aware of the genre in 2011 when a moral panic related to the lyrical content of Czech horrorcore rappers proliferated the mainstream. The above-mentioned rappers were accused of spreading hate speech while the court protected the rappers' freedom of speech. Rappers are now experimenting with the fusion of rap with jazz, soul and electronic music. Trap and grime are the latest trends that were adopted and adapted by local artists.

While academics often consider hip hop to be the platform for people that are otherwise silenced, and those that are not allowed to speak their mind about their situation, in the Czech Republic Roma minority had just a few opportunities to make it into the local rap music industry and gain a nationwide acceptance among the hip hop audience. In 2006 a group called Gipsy.cz gained much success with their debut album *Romano Hip Hop* combining the traditional Roma music with hip hop aesthetics. The front man of the group, Gipsy, was no freshman to the hip hop world as he was previously member of Syndrom Snopp and in 2004 released a solo album *Ya Favourite CD Rom* in English. Gipsy is now still mentoring the youth and released another three albums with the band Gipsy.cz which went rather unnoticed.

Lukrecius Chang, a rapper and European Champion in Kung-Fu is currently taking part in a Roma mentoring programme where he works with the youth and lectures about hip hop, martial arts and about his job as an assistant of crime prevention in his hometown of Karviná. Hip hop is very popular among Roma youth, as with any other ethnicities around the world, and this fact is also recognized by social workers, NGOs and activists. After the first successful project called Slova místo zbraní (Words Instead of Weapons) different cultural centres in and outside of Prague work with hip hop artists providing workshops in the elements of hip hop creating local Roma hip hop groups such as UGC, Cincinnati, Angel Mafia or De la Negra (see also Oravcová and Slačálek 2019; Růžička et al. 2017).

Similarly to other countries around the world, hip hop in general and rap music in particular, are dominated by men and perceived as a masculine domain. That is also the case of Czech rap music (see also Oravcová 2017). There are few women representing for each element (we will have to wait for a first female beatboxer). Most notably, Lara 303 released the first official female emcee album *Revolution* in 2009. Generally speaking female artists are accepted more as singers that occasionally rap rather than rappers. Among successful female artists it is important to name for example Sharlota, Annet X, Arleta or Hellwana.

In absence of an 'official' account of Czech hip hop history, there are notable contributions to the understanding of its development. One of those is a documentary series *Rap Story* released in 2021 by the Czech Television. Directed by Šimon Šafránek, the ten episodes cover the early beginnings as well as current developments in Czech rap music. In 2022 Ladislav 'Poeta' Zeman, music journalist, DJ and Radio SPIN host, released his book *Českej Rap* ('Czech rap') documenting the 30 years of the history of the genre based on interviews with major Czech rappers along with their discography and personal observations.

While there is still an ideological struggle going on debating who is 'real' and 'true' and what Czech hip hop should and should not sound like, the diversity and creativity is what is important and fuels the local scene to keep growing.

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