

CURTAIN CALL FOR THE EAST

JACK BARRON gets an eyecore in Warsaw at the Carrot Festival when rock from the East unveils itself to the West. Photos by EYE AND EYE.



LIBERO PRETIC, the festival organiser

THE CLUSTERS of inflated condoms hanging from the roof are bobbing, the huge paper sausages are swaying and the several thousand people in the audience are caught midway between baying and laughing.

Onstage, dressed like a mismatch of a New Guinea tribesman and an alien reptile, the Dadaist leader of Internationale Project Familia Radio Warszawa strikes a snare drum between the electronic pulses and screams what sounds like "Paranoia! Paranoia!"

The direct translation, I'm assured, is "C**** C****". We aren't in the ICA, New York's Cat Club, or any other Western art slum.

Amazingly enough, this stage — which has already witnessed Germany's mind-mincing Die Totliche Doris rolling around naked and singing about homosexuality, Israel's sublime soul searers Minimal Compact dealing out their 'Deadly Weapons', and Holland's acerbic anarcho-punks, The Ex, slashing liberal guilt to pieces with their 'Pökköherrie' — is in the centre of Europe.

And as my invitation said: "Poland is in the middle of Europe. Warsaw is in the centre of Poland. Gwardia Hall is in central Warsaw."

This three day Carrot Festival is the first international avant garde/alternative event to have taken place in Eastern Europe.

And that's due to the vision and energy of the absurdist onstage screaming at us. A Yugoslavian, his name is Libero Pretic. He got the idea for Carrot round about the time he was working as a dishwasher in London last August. Or so he says.

"I was listening to Rod Stewart interviews on the radio, listening to him farting all these nonsense on the air... Of course I felt like vomiting, and at that very moment I was thinking about inviting all these groups to Poland."

I'LL MEET you in Poland baby. So goes the refrain to Jim Thirlwell's satirical love song 'twixt Hitler and Stalin — a reminder of the country's bloody history. But not even the Foetus voice booming black humour down the headphones could mask the slight trepidation one feels as the LOT flight skims through the slate grey skies to Warsaw.

The first time I came here was late '82, shortly after the iron fist of martial law punched out Poland's poetic cheek. Two weeks cooped up in a bus with a Western rock group and ten beefcake security guards was no fun. The second time, taking in a festival in Lodz, I had my passport, and cameras stolen and ended up trapped in a lift at midnight between the 21st and 22nd floors of one of the country's swankiest hotels. I've still got a powerful case of ideological vertigo when the planes touch down in Warsaw.

"There is in reality no Iron Curtain anymore," reckons Walter Chelstowski. The manman behind CCS, one of Poland's few non-state studios, among his current musical projects shine 1,000,000 Bulgarians and Kosmetics Of Mrs Pinky.

"Even after martial law each year has been getting a little better in freedom. For example, before it was impossible to even print the names of some bands like, say, SS20. Now you can say in the newspapers and radio virtually every name, even the most obscene."

As we disembark, coming from a country with four million unemployed to a nation of full employment, the curtain swings open to reveal an economy where according to *The Observer* 40 per cent of the population are living below the official poverty line; where the average wage is 20,000 zlotys per month and a video tape costs 22,000 zls; where the price of a non-licensed Western record is 5-8,000 zls and...

Where the youth are mostly intensely friendly and creative precisely because a formal system of censorship still exists in the arts. And where a posse of people,



KAMPEC DOLORES — so Hungry for Love...

brandishing the paper hats that serve most imaginatively as the Carrot Festival programme, wait to greet us.

Piotr Miketa, our inspired translator, press rep Lydia and others from Alma Art beckon. AA are a student based organisation with 40 clubs and half a million members. They've put up the majority of the estimated 13-14 million zlotys it's costing to stage the festival.

Now these facts and figures may seem a bit dry, but try imagining this: your name is Libero. You play in a band whose idea of fun is to taunt the audience with electronic tapes about cars ***** trucks and spoons ***** forks before you proceed to just with your compatriots using huge electric wands.

Now imagine you want to raise the best part of a £1,000,000 to bring like-minded strangers from around the world to a country that politically exists on conservative conformity.

"I thought he was a nutter when he approached me with the idea last summer," comments Nick Hobbs. The ultra-efficient singer of The Shrubs has organised tours of Poland on behalf of many Western

bands and was involved in getting Everything But The Girl and Misty to Moscow last year.

"There was some problem getting permission from the Ministry Of Culture," confirms Marek Zbrzezny, over a welcoming dinner. The vice-president of Alma Art, he powered Libero's notion through. "The Minister said he didn't know of this music. He didn't give a positive or negative opinion. He just said, it's a short time to prepare this festival."

Carrot is in several senses a *fait accompli* where everything is argued over down to the size of posters. We've visited several bars but have yet to hear a bar of music.

OUTSIDE the Gwardia Hall, like any other country, the security guards are letting people in cut price and pocketing the proceeds. Meanwhile, in the half-light of a chilly dusk we get an opportunity to take in the amount of work that has gone into Carrot.

The aforementioned condoms, used because they're cheaper than balloons, peer at us with a transparent leer from the ceiling. Along the upper tiers of the arena hang sheets painted with neo-primitive designs. The stage curtain is made from hundreds of small pieces of paper and depicts the phallic vegetable symbol of the

"People still wanted to build an ideology around the carrot. It's red, they said. Full of vitamin A; A equals anarchy... Hey! Roll over Bugs Bunny and tell Poland the news"

style of living," I'm told. An amateur "underground" group, as opposed to officially sanctioned professionals, the Postmen from Roga specialise in absurdist lyrics. This is the first time they've appeared outside of Latvia let alone the USSR.

"Our main problem is we're an electronic group yet we don't have the necessary instruments to perform like one," they explain.

Indeed they are. A tape of their music, given to me by Soviet critic Art Trotsky finds The Postmen perched between Depeche Mode and The Beatles.

Nonetheless, introduced by a retired punch drunk boxer MC — "It's important to break down age barriers," reckons Libero — The Postmen skilfully recreate electronic pop on conventional instruments.

As someone points out, "There are 320,000,000 people in Russia. If there are the same proportion of talented musicians as anywhere else we can expect some amazing bands to emerge."

This is precisely why the USSR and Eastern Bloc in general is a potential arena to unlock the crisis of cultural constipation we live with in the West.

I have heard Soviet groups more to my taste for grit, a Siberian scratch and match band for example, but The Yellow Postmen acquit themselves admirably in the circumstances.

From Russia with love to Britain with arrogance, Wolfgang Press — electronics, overload guitar and a singer who wears Richard Butler's heart on his sleeve and keeps Nick Cave's despair in the wallet — are horrible. Cold, despite proclaiming to be a 'Sweetbox', and calculatedly 'modern', they substitute power for emotion and desecrate Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' in the process.

It must be said though that the audience gets off mightily on WP. All 4AD acts are very popular in Poland. This is because boy's label, like Mute and Factory, is one of the few British concerns with the vision to see that a few records sent to Eastern radio DJs is a huge investment for the future.

Already this strategy is partly paying off. Factory have licenced

Joy Division/New Order product to the main Polish 'new wave' label, Tonpress, as have Mute with Depeche. This is a major change in the Polish scene and as the economics of necessity draws the Iron Curtain even further apart one can expect more of this.

At the first of two midnight press conferences at the Hotel Solec three hundred bemused members of bands and the press gather. Aside from Libero, who's been awake for four nights fuelled on honey and garlic, telling us the meaning of 'alternative', nothing much is learned.

Yet what the press conferences — which heat up considerably the following evening when I inquire if Carrot is just a pawn in a political propaganda game — illustrate is just how serious the Polish mainstream media are taking the event. This becomes more intense when the three British rock critics present find themselves being interviewed on video about the state of rock.

But that's two hangovers later and some good music on.

TEST DEPT couldn't be present but Toby, a former member, spends the afternoon of the Carrot's second day scouting through the junkyards of Warsaw for any old iron. Teaming up with a guitarist from The Ex, he gives a performance which we unfortunately miss but he dubs "spontaneous".

Seven years in existence and five albums down the line, The Ex are a big stick of gelignite under an apathetic gullet.

Often cheaply characterised as Sonic Youth rip-offs with added politics, The Ex — judging by tonight's sighting — are one of the great post-hardcore rock groups in the world. Breathless and brutally brilliant, Holland should be proud of The Ex.

Israel certainly is of Minimal Compact, where they are seen as the most complete band ever to emerge. For some members, like bass-beautiful Malika, this trip to Poland is particularly emotional

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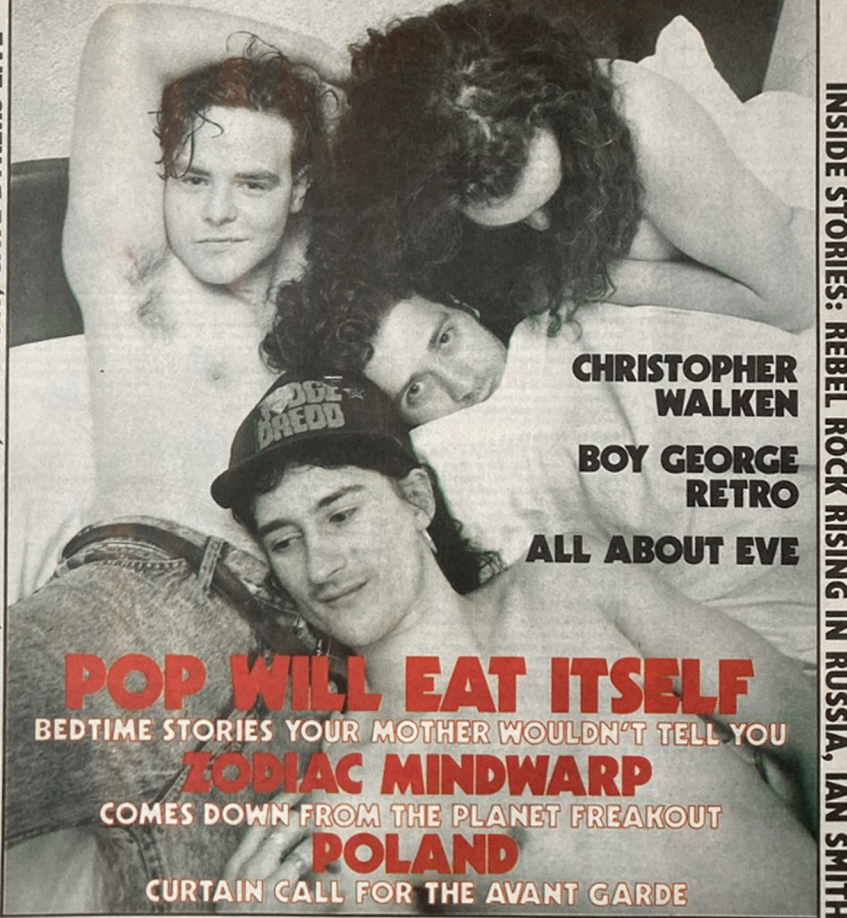
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POP WILL EAT ITSELF. GET LAID BY IAN TILTON

CURTAIN CALL FOR THE EAST

FROM PAGE 23

since they were born here. What's flowing out of the PA is what makes Minimal Compact, even on a below par gig, one of the most original groups extant.

Samy's shiny steel hard voice, Malika's fragility and Rami's scouring Yiddish soul combine to invoke a unique vocal kiss between the modern and ancient cultures of the Middle East. They cover territory ranging from pop through rock to ballads and each footprint on the map is imbued with the poignancy of fiery Jewish emotionality.

EVERYWHERE I go Minimal Compact seem to be interviewed by the Polish TV and press. They've certainly made a mark at Carrot and plan to come back. Maybe they'll be going to Hungary first though. For Carrot, as Csaba Hasonczy, of Budapest's superb Kampec Dolores, explains,

"The festival was initially conceived by Libero and me as a rolling roadshow going through all the Eastern Bloc and ending up in Moscow."

We're in the Kampec Dolores dressing room in the bowels of the hall post gig. Csaba is telling us that as soon as he gets back to Hungary he plans to put Carrot Part 2 into action. He smiles diffidently behind his glasses.

An hour ago onstage things were different. Kampec Dolores, formed after Csaba left Hungary's premier punk band, De Kontrol were pumping out melodic but ragged songs such as 'Hejhc' over a beat-box of tricks. Gabi's shrill but thrillingly pure voice and disturbed violin playing set the seal.

We miss the 'official' Russian band, Maszyna Wremieni, who've sold 40 million singles in the USSR. Appropriately the Soviet's name means Time Machine. And we've been told that their sub-Genesis

offerings aesthetically creak like they've just left the ark. It seems the audience think so. En masse they lit matches in a gesture of supreme irony when the Time Machine landed. This was followed by heckling.

Warsaw's coolest cats give the collective finger to Russia's legends. Alma Art are embarrassed and one can almost hear the diplomatic rumbblings in the corridors of power. Nick Hobbs and The Shrubs rectify this discontent with a jerky, dissonant set. They don't hedge around but plunge straight into the fracture of old rock and pull out bone splinters with glee.

And just when the band seem to be going off in so many directions it seems like they'll bust apart at the seams. Nick pulls all the elements back together by running back and forth while barking his dark poetry.

Did someone sip an hallucinogen into my vodka? The hall is filling with people out of a Fellini fantasy. A

Madonna with candles on her shoulders is dispensing silver from a huge funigitor; a silver sated man with a large mirror is reflecting spotlights back into the crowd. In the far corner an impromptu session is underway with a monkey on drums, a choirboy on bassoon and the rap mike.

Nearly as mindboggling as Internationale Project Familia Radio Warszawa's prior set, I bet this 'happening' is Libero's doing; it has the trait of his Dadaist humour: the appropriation of religious paraphernalia in a strongly Catholic country is deliciously wicked.

"It was down on the Sloop John B," sing David Thomas, bringing us back to reality.

The big man with the most delicate of physical and vocal gestures, aided not by The Wooden Birds but what appears to be a major part of Pere Ubu, just turns up the magic button to maximum. An accordion, a set of horns, and an

imagination unlimited in which little dinosaurs run free, he is transfixing. Between pillaging The Beach Boys and his final solo rendition of a spontaneous 'Goodnight', David Thomas' talent stands broader than his shoulders.

AND SO the Carrot has been eaten. I still haven't managed to track down Libero. There's still a question I want to ask him. A few days later, shaven and strangely suited, he whisks us off to a restaurant.

That song you were singing that sounded like 'Paranoia! Paranoia!' What is it about? Hah!

"No! What he was screaming was, C**** C****," laughs Piotr, our ever patient interpreter. Libero scratches his head and smiles.

"It wasn't meant to be either of those. What I was screaming was, Beefsteak! Beefsteak!" Welcome to Poland 1987, Dada.

KIN SOUNDS

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POP WILL EAT ITSELF

Tasteless . . . yes! But stupid? No, never! The Poppies rampage through Holland with James Brown tied to their back bumper. Can the Dutch survive their outrageous grossness? And — own up, Poppies! — who's got little Brown's trousers? He wants them back! Now!

ROCK 'N' POLE

Surely things must be better in Eastern Europe. But no. Euroman Jack Barron sneaks into Poland and what is the first thing he sees? Condoms hanging from a club ceiling! Honest! And then a crazy German band rolling naked — yes, absolutely stark, blinking naked! — across a stage. Ignoring such silly antics, jolly Jack files an investigative report on Rock In Poland. Pass the Vladivar and tell Uncle Gorbachev the news . . .