

# PILVAX

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Issue Six Summer 2009

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## **The Reeds**

by Tom Bass

Willy Reed's motorcade sighed along the thoroughfare. Posters of what he supposed to be his face decorated the way. The man on the posters looked nothing like him, for he had been sketched according to the deep, smoothness of his tone; while he was wan and drawn, the Willy Reed in the posters resembled a movie star. He was anonymity not fame, the voice.

Poles had congregated along the streets to see this extraordinary and unlikely hero who had materialized from the ether, a supernatural being made of American jazz. His fans clapped and waved. Others steadied homemade placards, sketched with the outlines of horns and pianos and painted with jazz's best and brightest names: Dizzy, Monk, Miles, Duke.

The carp-like mayor pointed out the city's attractions from the convoy: the smelly abattoir, the sausage factory, the textile mills that were the town's fortune, the stadium next to the bus terminal cloaked in diesel particles, the gray city hall across the street from the sole radio station, and a forlorn department store in the town's main square. They avoided the military base, the set of contorted towers that were a broadcast jamming station, the airfield and the ball-bearing plant.

"Good ground for jazz," he thought.

A sensitive moment passed when they came to the spot where saboteurs had revolted in the spring of 1956. Willy nodded bleakly at the site of the insurrection.

Willy remembered that he was forgetting to remember when he should be forgetting outright. It was a tricky lesson, negotiating what reality, what past and present, meant here in communist Poland.

Willy waved politely, acknowledged everyone. He smiled. He tipped his hat and bowed.

"Why thank you, thank you for listening!"

He was shocked. He was more popular than Kennedy. Groupies had besieged his hotel but he wasn't about to tell that to Emma, his wife. His minders in Munich and Washington would want to know. They would be pleased. Jazz was winning the war.

Willy Reed had a troubling interview in Warsaw towards the end of the tour. He listened after deflecting the pointed and embarrassingly incisive questions of a Mr. Ryszard Kapuscinski about the social conditions of blacks in America. It was unseemly to talk about poverty or inequality. Everyone had to believe in the lie. In that department, the Reds were equal.

"Why do white Americans love jazz?" asked Kapuscinski in his flawless, accent-cleansed English.

Willy knew but he pretended not to know as the questions came hard and fast. "Sexual innuendo? Individualism? Cool? Too cool for its own good? Because there's the Beatles and the Stones are the coolest?"

"They aren't just listening to black music, but remaking it, like Elvis," said Ryszard, rushing for an insight that would convince Willy that he was a friend.

Willy Reed was immune.

"The music guides me," he said. "I can't guide the music."

Yes, Willy Reed blew tunes all over the world. How he did it was a trade secret. It was all up to the voice.

He had been warned beforehand: be cautious.

But of who and what?

Of clever reporters like Ryszard who seemed to know it all?

Or the scruffy Polish musicians who urged upon him ingenious records made of flimsy X-ray film?

He laughed at his growing stack of morbid roentgens pressed into albums. The communists couldn't possibly be prepared for covert solutions to censorship like this. And what was the harm in smuggling those recordings west, when he loved rebellion like he loved music?

He wanted more.

The public address speakers were mounted in innumerable places. The whole country was wired for sound, for instructions and patriotic marches, no more so than in Warsaw's main department store.

The escalators were out of order. Willy took the zinc-coated elevator to find the music department on the top floor. He was stunned by the choice behind the counter: the doctrine of communist brotherhood had brought Balkan and Caucasian jazz to Poland. The clerk became irritable.

The smiling pig wanted to hear everything.

She begrudged every request and scratched from track to track, furiously operating the record player.

Only when Willy barged behind the counter to save the vinyl, did she retreat. In a corner she poured her anger into an ersatz coffee and a black cigarette. Willy admired how people went to work yet got paid for not working in Poland, but soon he forgot about these inconsistencies as he heard the unfamiliar compositions and modes: duduk mixed with a maqam-tuned piano or a trio of kavala, accordion and tombok. Joy stormed through his heart at the credit he would receive for such discoveries.

Later, Willy struggled to pay.

The clerk cringed: the foreigner needed to change money, which involved a detour to the foreign exchange safe in the basement. Then a manager had to be requested to open the box containing the coupons that he could exchange for his dollars and then zloty.

Why did they make it so hard, he wondered on the way back to his Warsaw hotel, his shoulders tipping into the bags of records.

He found his short-wave radio in its nylon case on the bed. He scanned the channels. The reception was dirt. A crackling something. Then at last his voice, his show, tinny, prerecorded, with none of the verve of a live transmission. The chord changes were hardly there.

He bristled when he realized the programmers had amended the song list. Where was the hot angry jazz poet Gil?

Fearful, the editors had been too sharp. If Willy deviated, the memos would come. The programming honchos didn't love jazz in the least. But they collaborated to make glamour in the studio, Willy hunched up in front of the microphone, the god-like, knightly tenor in his throat, holed up like an owl.

Jazz reinvented itself was what he usually explained—no need to get alarmed. The administrative interference made him backpedal about getting back to Washington. Anyway, they'd have to wait. Willy had agreed to meet Emma in Barcelona after the Polish tour. It wasn't just his wife's idea: he was curious about the Catalan antenna farm that pushed his voice from the Mediterranean to Poland and beyond . . .

*The remainder of Tom Bass's story can be found in ISSUE 6 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.*