

6. Open Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow (March 1989)

You know a band has clicked when its musicians play as a collective, when they know what to expect from one another and when they don't get in each other's way, either musically or on stage. It must be a perfectly-knit team in which all band members have a clear understanding of their roles. Sometime in mid-March, that's exactly how I started feeling about The Funky Leninz.

Spring was slowly beginning to fill the air, bringing with it the first buds of an authentic professional funk band. We had already been practicing in full swing for almost a month, day in, day out. Dvořák, Gerendáš and Slováček had decided to cancel most of their other commitments to join the others in slogging away endless hours in the rehearsal room.

Even the newbies were beginning to see their hard work pay off. Panenka's guitar playing was improving with each passing song and Lájoš on drums was learning to tame his penchant for gratuitous showboating. Even the brass duo were a pleasant surprise. Gerendáš was tooting away as if his life depended on it and Slováček, too, was playing decently enough despite clearly treating the whole thing as just another earner. Not that there was anything wrong with that. I hadn't asked anything more of him.

Štrougal, on the other hand, was literally gushing with energy. He had entirely abandoned his previously-held disdain and had become the band's true leader and powerhouse. He orchestrated, praised and criticized, as well as regularly dropping in on me in the rehearsal room with pointers on songs. He had clearly been spending his evenings listening to funk records borrowed from the library at the Institute of Studies for Bourgeois Thought, carefully selecting those records that he thought would best fit our repertoire.

Then later, once we had agreed to his request for regular meet-ups, he would always bring along outstanding, quickly scribbled-down lyrics, which were always rhythmically and ideologically spot on. However, he attended practices infrequently, often failing to show up for three days straight before sauntering in on the fourth day without feeling any need to explain his absence.

It was just something I had to put up with. He and the band were like separate entities. Spending every day with musicians going over the same song over and over wasn't really his scene. He could listen to a rehearsed piece just once and then nail it first time without having any reason to repeat it. At least not within the four walls of the rehearsal room.

With each passing practice, there was a growing conviction that The Funky Leninz were ready to take their art to the public. Without telling anyone, I had slowly begun to arrange our first performance. Of course, I knew we couldn't headline straight away. No one would come to see a band they had never heard of. And who could blame them?

So it was my job to find a band we could support to avoid disgracing ourselves. But first I had to choose a club that wasn't too big and was preferably on the city's outskirts. The Barricade Club in Strašnice seemed to fit the bill.

The Barricade was shrouded in the socialist youth work tradition. Back then, it was mainly metal heads and punks that played there, for the most part under the auspices of some peripheral socialist youth cell, and the place had a constant bloc of fanatics who congregated there. Furthermore, it was a small club where you were always just a quick dash from the back exit if necessary. It must be said that such things did cross my mind.

I knew the Barricade Club's cultural officer quite well (I would meet him at socialist education courses and committee meetings) and so, in view of our long-standing comradeship, he was happy to lend a helping hand. Of course, I never filled him in on Husák's monumental plan. The abridged version was much more straightforward – I had a rock band that was just starting out and I wanted to give them their break.

He suggested Tango as the best band to support. They played at the Barricade every third Thursday of the month. I concurred, having known them from concerts at the Kobylisy Cultural Centre.

If you remember them, you're bound to agree they were a good choice. They had a couple of airplay hits in the late 80s, with songs such as *Break This Glass*, but things had gone pear-shaped for them ever since Ota Baláž left them for Nová Růže.

Můra, hop, their latest album released a year earlier on the Supraphon label, had received lousy reviews. Then their career path suffered a fatal blow at the 1987 Bratislava Lyra Festival, when they brought shame on themselves with a failed cover version of an Ala Pugacheva song.

Since then, their fans – for whom new wave was now old hat – had been deserting them. Whereas they would doubtless have turned their noses up at a club the size of the Barricade just two years previously, by the time March 1989 rolled around, they were thankful even to have that.

I called their manager, who couldn't care less who supported them. He probably forgot what our name was just seconds after hearing it over the phone. He even questioned why we had chosen them of all bands. He, too, probably knew that Tango would never set the world alight and probably reckoned they would break up soon anyway – which they did a couple of months later.

Nevertheless, he accepted my offer, it probably having occurred to him that having some deadbeat amateur warm-up act play before them would give Tango the chance to show they still had it. He would soon realise this was a fatal mistake.

I waited until it had all been arranged before informing the band of the date and venue of their debut gig. We still had ten days ahead of us in which to learn three more new songs.

That would give us a grand total of six songs for a set of precisely twenty minutes. That wasn't a terribly long time by any means, but it was all support bands got.

Our name wouldn't feature on the promo posters as the monthly listings were already up, although there was no room for a support band on Tango's promo posters anyway. In hindsight, it may have seemed as though we were leaving an escape hatch open in case of failure, and we probably were. After all, I had known dozens of bands in the past whose debuts hadn't exactly been received with great gusto and whose first concert also turned out to be their last. We all had our minor misgivings.

Naturally, the issue was immediately raised of how our audience would react to a host of celebrities lining up on stage in front of them. My solution was simple. "Go out in costume!" I said. I already had some ideas for their image ready and the amusement sparked by my first suggestion lead the musicians to become more receptive to the others.

Dvořák promised to arrange a trip to the costume storage facility at the Barrandov film studios, and so a couple of days later we stood surrounded by rows and rows of clothes racks containing all manner of costumes from famous films. Panenka was quite taken with an astronaut's costume from the sci-fi picture *Voyage to the End of the Universe*, presumably because the helmet covered up his enormous moustache. Lájoš had no need for a disguise, but nevertheless took a fancy to a Red Indian costume with a giant headdress and feathers. Gerendáš and Slováček, on the other hand, were quite content with just domino masks.

Dvořák, who after all these years was familiar with all manner of stage props, had by far the least problem finding a costume, dressing up in a clown suit he had worn recently in a TV fairy tale. By contrast, Štrougal had the hardest time finding a disguise. He tried on one costume after another and, after spending almost three hours in the costume department, nothing seemed fit for purpose.

Just when all hope seemed lost, he stumbled across a WWII Soviet officer's uniform. We all knew this would make him a little nostalgic, but when he put on the hard helmet and then placed his black glasses back over his eyes, it was clear that his search for a costume had come to an end.

On the day of the gig, I cancelled the mid-morning practice and told my shock troops to meet up at five. I wanted to get them all in as early as possible so that we could have another run-through of each song before setting off together for Strašnice.

Lájoš was first to arrive at four thirty, surprised to be the first one in the rehearsal room. When I told him he was early, he sat down at his kit and practiced some new fills that had come to him during the day.

The others turned up around five, first Slováček and Gerendáš, followed by Panenka. That afternoon, Dvořák had a production of *The Bartered Bride* at the National Theatre and

so arrived at the same time as Štrougal, who this time surpassed even himself by arriving half an hour late.

I watched them huddled together and they looked fraught with nerves. These men were used to the glare of the audience, packed stadiums, conference halls and the theatre stage. Yet on this occasion they would be up in front of an adversary of a quite different kind: an amorphous mass of partisan music lovers whose predilections no one could predict.

I wanted to break the uncomfortable tension in the air, but Štrougal spoke up before I could muster up the courage. He spoke curtly as usual, but to the point: "Comrades... I can see that you are worried and afraid of playing in front of an audience for the first time. And I know exactly how you feel. But you must realise that this is a test of our resolve, and the first of many at that. We must be grateful for such challenges and such misgivings. Because the moment we face up to our fears is the moment we will feel truly alive. May the general funk prevail!"

These words were precisely what The Funky Leninz needed to hear. At one stroke, they got back their old resolve and their nerves had left them by the time they had gone through their repertoire one last time. Panenka even had a modest little attempt at a solo before the last verse of *Solution Free*, which was roundly applauded by the rest of the band.

At half seven, setting off in good spirits, we caught the tram to the club. Everyone was carrying their own costumes in their bags and hiding their faces under the large-peak baseball caps I had bought for them.

On reaching the Barricade, we were let in by a club official who, head bowed, looked over my band members with a look of total apathy before proceeding to take no more notice of us. We had been promised the use of the instruments of the evening's headliners, so the musicians immediately set out to locate them.

Unable to find the guitar, Panenka went over to ask one of the roadies, who was setting up the amplifiers on the stage. The roadie stopped what he was doing and stared up at the footballer in a state of shock, in apparent disbelief that this legend of the beautiful game was standing there before him. He then seemed to dismiss the idea, perhaps telling himself that his mind was playing tricks on him and that, in the dim light of the club, the mind conjectures more than it sees. Shortly afterwards, though, his identity would be revealed by an unfortunate chance occurrence.

Actually, the roadie had merely been disentangling a cable knot, and when Panenka spoke to him a second time, he was taken by surprise and dropped the knot, which rolled towards our guitarist. Panenka forgot all about the guitar and instinctively took the football-shaped knot on his instep before juggling it from one foot to the other. At one point, he brought it down on the inside of his foot before rolling it onto his Achilles and letting it fall to the ground.

This instinctive reaction wired into his footballing brain had betrayed him and, before he could realise what he had done, the roadie cried out in surprise, "Panenka!"

Around them, all eyes turned to stare at the one-time soccer star, who was now meekly trying to conceal his enormous moustache.

"But Mr Panenka, I didn't know you also played rock music," said the roadie apologetically.

"It's just a little jamming with friends," said the footballer gingerly. "May I have the guitar now please, Comrade?"

The man brought the instrument backstage and devoutly handed it over, gazing at Panenka throughout. This did have one advantage, however, as the other band members were able to change into their costumes in the meantime. Once we had finally gathered up all the instruments, the sound engineer ran a check to see how it all sounded. He seemed to make a hash of it, particularly with the brass, as Slováček was quick to point out. But we were in no position to complain.

At around ten to eight, the doors of the hall opened and the first audience members began to trickle in. They first made their way to the bar and then, beaker in hand, stood clustered around the hall, talking noisily. Most of them were dressed in leather motorcycle jackets, torn jeans and t-shirts emblazoned with the face of Death – that well-known attire of fallen metal culture. Their overgrown beards and unwashed hair further added to their antisocial appearance, and I began to fear whether this was really the right audience for The Funky Leninz.

Metal and hard rock fans were known for being hard to please, but also for being fair. They did not usually write off a band after the opening bars and would instead let them get through at least one song. The hard core, who were part of the club's furniture, also included well-dressed girls and blue-collar socialist youths.

Backstage we bumped into Tango, who were sitting swigging beer as we passed through the prep room. The singer looked at Štrougal in his Soviet uniform and helmet and burst out laughing.

"Listen, you old farts. Just make sure nothing happens to our instruments," said the long-haired guy beside him.

Just before going out, the third member remarked, "Don't worry. If anything happens, we'll call you an ambulance." This was met by another volley of laughter from his mates.

Perhaps it was down to the disparaging remarks, but The Funky Leninz burst onto the stage like lions. They rushed over to their instruments and quickly took up their positions. Lájoš counted them in and the band launched into *Solution Free*. I couldn't say how many people were in the club at that point, but it was definitely no more than thirty. They stood leaning against the heaters, sipping at their beer or chatting away.

A support band is something to be endured. The Funky Leninz, however, took a slightly different view of things, and their entrance was both uncompromising and lethal. I was backstage peering in through the door crack behind the drummer. Even from there, at such a distance from the amplifiers, I could feel how loud the music was.

The intro. Panenka ground out an economical riff with a maximum of vigour, Dvořák picked up the bass line, the brass duo bubbled along like a waterfall and Lájoš... well, Lájoš defied gravity with his drumming. He was the band's engine, or rather its engineer and boilerman, going hell for leather on that giant engine of funk. His drumsticks were moving so fast as to become one big blur.

And Štrougal.... Where the devil was Štrougal? My eyes scanned the podium for him, but to no avail. I was sure he had gone out with the rest of the band, but all of a sudden he was missing.

The Leninz reached the end of the intro and then, to my surprise, started playing it over again. This was no mistake, but part of a plan called Waiting for Štrougal. The music seemed to have gotten even louder and heavier, as though someone had shifted them up a gear. A couple of girls had their fingers in their ears, while others stared in disbelief at what was happening on stage. This wasn't Tango, and it wasn't some lousy warm-up act. This was something they had never heard the likes of before.

That's when I spotted Štrougal. He was barging his way through the crowd of spectators as he hurried his way to the podium. I realised what had happened. I daren't have believed it, but he was the one behind it all. He had gone over to the sound engineer's desk personally, and before the guy in the sweater could object, he turned up the volume into the red. Motioning to the band from a distance to start playing, he made his way back to the microphone.

Once in front of the stage, he leapt up with both feet, then grabbed the microphone and began to sing. Years later, I can still picture the scene. I would later explain it as Štrougal's symbolic emergence from the populace. From the lower strata of human society, where sweat pours and people drink away their pain. The salt of the nation, whence revolutions rise and aspire to their ultimate goals.

Nowadays, of course, I look upon it as the act by which Štrougal launched his band, taking it before the public in a way that said, "We're different. We don't play at an ordinary volume. We are The Funky Leninz!"

If Lájoš had been ruling the stage until then, the reins of the entire spectacle were now firmly in Štrougal's hands. The military costume now made sense – it was as though he was fighting a war against apathy from the stage, with him at the head of it. Quickly, I ran across the prep room, down the stairs and stood myself next to the power column. The sound engineer had noticeably eased the volume, but it was still loud enough.

I welcomed his decision, for Štrougal's voice would otherwise have undoubtedly blown the treble and mid-range of all the club's amplifiers during the chorus of *Solution Free*. He screamed with incredible intensity, shrieking and yelling until he was red in the face, only to deliver the next line soothingly and softly., His performance was filled with an incredible zest that wasn't there during practice. He needed an audience to get the best out of him, and now he finally had it.

At one moment, he sang with an almighty roar as if he were James Brown himself, sending a shiver down my spine. Whether because he had learned it to such perfection or because he just knew what the song needed, I couldn't say. Once *Solution Free* was over, Štrougal turned his back to the microphone and wildly gesticulated for Lájoš to launch straight into the next song.

Next up was *Do It Then*, a cover of *Move On Up* by Curtis Mayfield. The reworked lyrics raged over total nuclear disarmament, while on stage all hell broke loose as if an atomic bomb were going off. Štrougal whirred on his own axis before breaking into a dervish dance. He wound up clinging to the microphone stand, swaying from side to side, at which juncture he began to stamp his feet wildly to the beat.

There was an animal within him, and the music behind him incited him to outlandishness. This even caught on with a few people in the audience, who began to sway to the funky beat. Still rather self-consciously and awkwardly, but you could tell they were feeling the music. Curiously enough, most of them were rockers in leather jackets.

Several young men in socialist youth shirts and ties stood aside watching over the scene in evident agony. They frowned, gesturing towards Štrougal. I even heard two people in my vicinity shouting to each other that the singer was laying it on too thick. It crossed my mind that these were exactly the kind of slumberers in the party cells that we needed to awaken.

The Leninz then pulled out *Like It*, a cover version of *Flash Light* by Parliament, which we had been rehearsing in an abridged version because Panenka was finding some of the riffs problematic. If truth be told, he had never even gotten this abridged version right and cursed it every time he played it.

He usually stayed behind after practice, when everyone else had already gone home, to work through the endless tricky parts. Just like when practicing his free kicks or dribbling, he was never happy with anything less than total perfection.

His doggedness paid off - that evening he played out every bar of *Like It* with distinction. As soon as the track finished, I could just about see his wide grin inside of his astronaut's helmet. Štrougal gave him a pat on the shoulder as he approached the microphone after the final coda. We were four tracks in and our allotted time was drawing to a close.

Second to last, they played *And I Believe*, a song with the greatest hit potential, which wrenched at every last soul in the club. Sweat was streaming out from under Štrougal's glasses. He must have been roasting in that uniform, but he wouldn't have been himself without it. His energy hadn't abandoned him and he romped incessantly across the stage, only just missing the strutting Panenka.

During one of Panenka's intricate long solos, I spotted Dobrý from Panton Records in the first row. His eyes were open wide and he was shivering in a trance-like state. I would have gone over to say hello, but he seemed out of his senses, as though in another dimension. That night, The Funky Leninz were just that powerful. No one could resist them.

I returned backstage for the final song. Suddenly, there standing before me, was Růženka. She had a grin from ear to ear as she tried to tell me something, but I couldn't understand a word in all that noise. She eventually relented and gave me a thumbs-up. We sat on a drum box and enjoyed the gentle intro into *I'll Take You Home*, a cover of *Ride On* by Parliament.

I was moved close to tears, but I didn't want to cry in front of Růženka. After all, men shouldn't show their emotions. All that I had been through since the very beginning was made worth it by this wonderful triumphant feeling. I could hear the jangling of guitars, the pumping bassline, the drums, Štrougal's vocals, all coming in muffled from the stage, and in that moment, it felt like it was my own heart that was beating.

The music flowed through me. Maybe it was the mood, but in that precise moment, something entirely unexpected happened as my hands –without any input from my brain – did the unlikeliest of things. They reached out to Růženka and grasped her hands. Those soft palms rested in mine as I gazed deep into her eyes. She didn't flinch, but instead gripped my hands back as we listened together.

I didn't have to be in the hall to know that The Funky Leninz' last song would – plainly and simply – blow this metal shindig apart. They would rip the wooden stage from the ground and fly off into the stratosphere. The entire audience would be soaked to the skin and would still be hearing a whistling in their ears the the next again day. But they would be all the better for it, for in that whistling they would hear the final bars of our final song.

I also knew that Tango would never step out that night. During the third song, those proud rock bruisers came out to view the hall and decided they'd rather slip out quietly. No one would give a jot about them that evening because The Funky Leninz had built up to a climax, ecstatic without precedent, after which nothing else could come.

The final song lasted around twenty minutes. It was something truly special, as time seemed to stand still. In that magic moment, with mine and Růženka's souls entwined, I didn't mind this in the least. I could hear Panenka and Dvořák losing themselves in a mad

psychedelic jam, massively supported by Lájoš' looping, pummelling beat. They couldn't manage to wrap it up.

Eventually, however, fatigue set in. Surprisingly, the first one to fall was Lájoš, who began to lose the beat, left out the symbol crashes and then suddenly stopped playing altogether. Without their drummer, The Funky Leninz were unable to tread water for long. A moment later, Panenka slipped up and couldn't get back into the groove, instead letting the guitar feed back over the speaker. Then Gerendáš, too, sank to his knees. All that was left to be heard of the instruments was a bass guitar slowly losing its breath.

Only Štrougal wasn't for giving up, and with his last ounces of strength he repeated the lines, "I'll take you home... I'll take you home." But his voice was now failing him, and he spent the last few moments wheezing until even he was finished. Immediately, Růženka and I – still holding hands – rushed onto the stage. Some of the band were leaning on the amplifiers, while others shuffled slowly towards us.

Applause? None came. Just as all the band members had used up all their strength, the audience, too, had wrung themselves out, and now could only roll their eyes in disbelief.

Their exhaustion was evident once we were backstage, but so was their joy. Dvořák and Panenka patted each other on the back, Lájoš thanked and hugged me as if I had been the one to pull it off. Even Gerendáš pulled out a cigar from nowhere and shared draws with Panenka, filling the room with thick smoke.

Only Štrougal remained steadfastly calm. He came into the dressing room last and everyone fell silent as if by command, as they knew he had something he wanted to say.

"Thanks everyone. That was magnificent," he announced succinctly. He then took off the top half of his uniform, revealing a dress shirt underneath. He pulled out a mirror and a comb and began fixing his hair.

He was no longer the on-stage animal that had gotten the audience screaming like lunatics. Now sitting opposite us was a calm, composed gentleman who didn't seem to belong to the group. He didn't join in the general merriment, instead asking me only when the next practice would be. He then picked up his jacket, said goodbye and left. For the record, the rest of the group – except for Slováček, who left shortly after Štrougal – spent the night celebrating in the pub until the early hours.

As for me, I gave Růženka a lift back to Krč, where she lived with her parents. We kept holding hands the whole way, but neither of us spoke a word. We didn't have to. We had experienced something magical that evening, which words could only spoil. When I fell asleep that night, I could still feel her touch on my hands. Then a wonderful gig by The Funky Leninz unfolded under my eyelids.