

BIGGER THAN ELVIS?

DEAN REED, THE RED ELVIS: THE MAN WHO BROUGHT ROCK-N-ROLL INTO THE SOVIET UNION.

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My story begins in Moscow. I had been invited to the Moscow International Film Festival to present a film. I was walking through Red Square with my interpreter when we saw a man being mobbed by hundreds of people for his autograph.

“Oh, my God!” said my interpreter. “It’s Dean Reed!”

I said, “Who is Dean Reed?”

“Who is Dean Reed?” exclaimed Oleg, “Why, he is the most famous American in the whole world!”¹

Will Roberts has chosen this part of *American Rebel* - his 1985 documentary film about Dean Reed – for the trailer. As any trailer should deliver the most important idea of the film, this very trailer, indeed, tells us a controversial story of how a person could be immensely popular and completely unknown at the same time. Paradoxically as it sounds, it is exactly what happened to American singer and performer Dean Reed.

As a Russian born in the USSR, I know perfectly who Dean Reed was – a great and extremely famous singer, actor and performer, a good-looking American prince who lived in Moscow at one point of the late 1960s and the early 1970s and had always been adored and cherished in the whole Soviet Bloc.² What is strange, however, is that he seems to be well-known everywhere but not in the United States, where he was from. This guy from Colorado, who was “bigger than Elvis”³ in Latin America and in the Soviet Bloc, this freedom fighter and singer for peace with a gun in one hand and a guitar in the other, this outrageously famous performer remains totally unknown in his

¹ *American Rebel*, film trailer, dir. W. Roberts, USA, 1985, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0WF-sLPzBw>

² “From the Berlin Wall to Siberia – Dean Reed from Colorado is the biggest star in popmusic. Reed is called the most prominent American after President Ford and Henry Kissinger by Russians and other East-Europeans.” Quoted from “The Red Elvis or the Strange Death of Dean Reed, Socialisms Biggest Popstar,” IkonoTV, June 16, 2011, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://ikono.tv/2011/06/the-red-elvis-or-the-strange-death-of-dean-reed-socialisms-biggest-popstar/>

native land. Yet, in the media he is often labeled as the Red Elvis,⁴ and it is interesting to track the nickname. Could we speak of the Red Elvis as a notion? What do the two artists have in common? What niche in the world culture does Dean Reed occupy and does he at all? Is Dean Reed actually comparable to Elvis, and if so, to what extent?

All these questions are hard to answer without taking a careful look at who Dean Reed was. We seem to know everything about Elvis: we know how he looked like, we know the aspects of his private life and marriage, we know his songs by heart and we remember his roles in Hollywood. By the presence of Elvis the King the music history is divided into two significant parts - before and after Elvis, - because what he did was that he had changed the whole notion of music.⁵ It has never been the same since the world first saw Elvis Presley. But who is Dean Reed? And why this guy is compared to the King?

Reed was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1938; he moved to Los Angeles in his early twenties where in the early 1960s he achieved some relative commercial success as a singer with his modestly popular singles, including *The Search*, *I Kissed a Queen*, *A Pair of Scissors*, *Annabelle*, *No Wonder*, and *Our Summer Romance*. While none of his singles was really popular in the USA, *Our Summer Romance* became truly red-hot in South America. Reed was became so successful there that he even stayed in Argentina following one of his Latin American tours. Coming of age in South America, Reed developed some kind of leftist political philosophy and started to protest against nuclear weapons, military regimes, discrimination, poverty, oppression, and the Vietnam war. He later spent some years in Rome, Italy, still recording albums and acting mainly in Italian-style "spaghetti" westerns. In 1967 he first went to Moscow, where his success proved to be immense. He lived in Moscow till 1973 when he moved to East Berlin. In Germany the Red Elvis went on with his career and in 1986 died under puzzling circumstances, six

³ Bill Horrigan, "Bigger than Elvis, Hotter than Frankie," *Art Pages*, November 6, 1985, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://deanreed.de/img-sites/arts19851106.html>

⁴ See, for instance, the list of cited works.

⁵ "Singing, Elvis was the convergence of all the pop traditions [...] But there was something more in his music. This was plainly a new musical form. It was not just a hack's tin pan alley synthesis but an revolutionary break. Douglas T. Miller, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 301.

months after receiving hate mail from the US after his participation in a show *60 Minutes* where he denounced the States.

Reed was often called the Red Elvis, but it was just one of his nicknames. In the media he was also referred to as the Johnny Cash of Communism, Comrade Rock Star, the Red Cowboy, the Singing Marxist, the Beautiful Singing Cowboy, the Iron Curtain Elvis, Rock-n-Roll Missionary, the Frank Sinatra of Russia, Mr. Simpatico. Every single label makes sense, but the one which is used the most is the Red Elvis. So what is it that connects the two great artists?

The way of singing of Elvis Presley was something completely new in the times he appeared. It is not that he had some extraordinary voice quality, but he was a pioneer – he was the first white guy singing as black. Elvis created that bridge between the white and black cultures, and united them. In his music he combined the two, and took the best from each part. Unlike his predecessors, Presley did not just mix different styles, but created a new form of music. Metaphorically speaking, he took the best from the past and cut the rest off, so that now we clearly distinguish the two significant eras – the one before and the one after Elvis. This is probably the most important achievement of the King of Rock-n-Roll, this is what he is known and loved for.

As for Dean Reed, there was nothing of the sort, moreover, he never created anything new. What he did, however, was that he brought Rock-n-Roll to the USSR. Reed had his own songs but the major part of what he was performing and recording were cover versions of American and sometimes European hits of those times. That was how the Soviet people got to know the songs of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Chuck Berry and many others. Elvis was strictly forbidden in the USSR as he represented the pure American idea - everything about Elvis was too much American and thus considered to be spoiling and therefore impermissible for the Soviet people.⁶ Reed was loved and

⁶ In the late 1940 in the USSR there was launched a campaign against “vestiges of bourgeois ideology, nourished on influences from the decadent West,” aimed at permeating “with the high demands of the musical creation of the Soviet people.” The journal *Soviet Music* warned that “all attempts to engulf the world with the scanty products of the venal American muse are nothing but frontier ideological expansion of American imperialism, propaganda for reactionary obscurantist misanthropic ideas.” Alan M. Ball, *Imagining America: Influences and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 112.

cherished by the government for his political views, thus everything he performed was good for the masses, even if it was the good old American Rock-n-Roll.⁷

Of course in the Soviet Bloc there were people who listened to the so called “not recommended” music, and they found their ways to get the records and to spread them. Although these people were numerous, and we could even speak about the whole generation of young people who were completely into Rock-n-Roll and later Rock music, none of these music genres was officially approved. Soviet official Rock bands, or VIA⁸ bands as they were called in the USSR, were not allowed to perform cover versions to any American hits, and the only guy who could do that was Dean Reed.

It is also to be said that Reed's way of singing was to some extent close to the one of Presley. A Chilean music producer Coucho Fernandez describes the way in which Reed sings *Our Summer Romance* as almost the same as the one of Elvis Presley: “It is a very distinctive rhythm. A lot like Elvis but a bit watered down. The way he goes down with his voice is practically the same.”⁹ Fernandez even adds: “If Elvis could hear it he'd sue him.” Theoretically Elvis could have heard *Our Summer Romance* as that song was recorded by Reed in 1959 when he was still in the States, and Reed made the charts with that single. The song never became immensely popular in the USA but it was noticed by Americans. The last remark of Coucho Fernandez proves how close Dean Reed was to Elvis Presley in the terms of singing. As for the way of performing, Reed never tried to copy any of the fantastic performances of Elvis. In fact, Reed was not a very gifted performer, and his music talent was rather ordinary, but he was so sincere, so handsome, and so open-hearted that people adored him. Reed did not follow nor copy the dance-as-ritual style of Elvis, nor was he among those performers whose body became part of their music, such as Elvis himself, Mick Jagger, James Brown. In this sense Reed did not keep up the pace with the tendencies, so to speak, but at the same time the craze for Dean

⁷ Already during his first visit to Moscow in 1967 Reed participated a Soviet TV-show *Goluboi Ogonek* where the most famous Russian singers and music band performed. Since then and till 1981 the state recording company, Melodia, released 7 LPs and 4 EPs of Dean Reed.

⁸ VIA (Russian: ВИА), or Vokalno-Instrumentalny Ansambl (“Vocal – Instrumental Ensemble”), was the official name applied to pop and rock bands in the Soviet Union. Soviet VIAs played a specific style of pop music. They performed youth-oriented radio-friendly music, which was a mix of contemporary Western and Soviet trends.

⁹ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

Reed was as burning hot as the one for Elvis Presley, only it was not as far-and-wide spread. This is how Coucho Fernandez recalls a live show of Reed in Santiago de Chile:

The heat was incredible, the smell of the crowd hung thick in the air. This was a singer who had such a forceful presence on stage that he drove the audience wild. 8000 women were so frantic, you couldn't hear a word the guy was singing. It was the funniest thing I've ever seen.

Dean Reed's voice wasn't particularly good and he was out of tune that day, but no one even noticed. I was watching from the back from a special room, a separate room with all the other DJs. The others couldn't hear him, but we could, because we had headphones. We could hear Dean was laughing about it all, too. Anyhow, it was a madhouse when he left. He was mobbed when he went out on the street. [...] And he loved it!¹⁰

Indeed, Reed was a very good-looking young man. Women across the world went crazy about him, just like they went crazy about Elvis. In the Soviet Union Dean was a real sex-symbol during the time of his fame, although officially for the communist party there was no sex in the USSR, thus no sex-symbols nor sex-icons were possible. A well-known Russian journalist and music historian Artemy Troitsky recalls that in 1986 when people in the USSR got to know that Reed was found dead, the sorrow was immense, and there were many women who committed suicide or attempted it.¹¹ A good friend of Troitsky passed away in this way as she could not imagine living while knowing that Reed was no longer alive.

It is to be underlined, however, that it is not only by his comeliness, blue eyes and athletic build that Dean Reed became popular in the USSR. His appearance gave him a good start and made him popular with women, but Dean Reed was much more than that. Everybody liked him, and every strata could find something attractive in Reed. As a result, the audience of Dean Reed did not only consist of young women who saw him as a beautiful singing American prince. His audience varied: there were both men and women, teenagers and adults. And this is what differs Reed from Elvis, who was mostly idolized by women, at least as it seemed.

¹⁰ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

¹¹ *Kto Vy, Mister Reed? (Who Are You, Mister Reed?)* Dir. Viktor Belyakov, Russia, 2004, accessed October 12, 2011, www.rutv.ru/video.html?vid=123880

Of course, had Reed other political ideas he would have never achieved what he had achieved in the Soviet Bloc. His anti-American political views along with the fact that he was American himself made him special and he had always been used by the Soviet government as a propaganda weapon. In the 2004 Russian documentary film *Kto Vy, Mister Reed? (Who Are You, Mister Reed?)*¹² this fact is widely discussed and proved by interviews with some Soviet politicians.

The Twentieth century was probably the first one in which absolutely everything eventually developed some political meaning. In the century when even tomato soup went political it is hard to put the politics aside. The same thing happened to music, and it is impossible to speak about Dean Reed without taking into consideration his political significance.

For the government of the USSR Reed was as a heaven-sent gift. It was just before Reed appeared in Moscow that it became clear that popular music could be used as propaganda. And there he was – the good-looking all-American golden boy, who loved socialism and wanted to put an end to the wrong (in the eyes of communists) capitalistic system of the West. Reed was easy to exploit, as he was so pure, so idealistic, so faithful; he spoke almost as a child: “I am quite sure the world will go on with or without Dean Reed. I'm not that important. But for me personally, my life only has a meaning if I can support and participate in the struggle for social progress in the world.”¹³ So they let him participate, while using him as a weapon in the virtual but extremely tense struggle for the world supremacy between the USA and the USSR.

It was not only in the Soviet State that music was used as a Cold War weapon. When Elvis Presley was sent to Germany to serve in the army, in the Soviet Bloc it was seen as if the States based their missiles on the territory of FRG. It was considered to be almost a direct threat. Elvis was the representation of the all-American values, and these values could not be any close to the USSR. Whether by accident or design, in 1973 Reed moved to East Berlin. In the documentary film *Who Are You, Mister Reed?* there is an interview with one of Reed's partners – an Estonian actress Eve Kivi – where she argues

¹² *Kto Vy, Mister Reed? (Who Are You, Mister Reed?)* Dir. Viktor Belyakov, Russia, 2004, accessed October 12, 2011, www.rutv.ru/video.html?vid=123880

¹³ Dean Reed quoted from *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

that Reed was sent to Germany by the Soviet government, and although he wanted to stay in Moscow, he had to leave. It remains unclear whether it is true or not, but the fact that Dean Reed settled in East Berlin is very significant. The epicenter and the core of the Cold War has never been Moscow nor Washington. It has always been Berlin, the divided city holding the only visible part of the imaginary Iron Curtain, as if to prove once again its existence. Thus, fourteen years after Elvis served in Friedberg, Dean Reed appeared in East Berlin; and if it was planned it was a knight's move: the Soviets were replying with the same weapon, only it was twice more harmful because the brand new Red Weapon was born in America.

In this light, the name Red Elvis could be arguably seen as opposed to Elvis, as the label that does not point at the common features but at the differences. Few people know that in the Russian language the words “red” (Russian: красный, - krasny) and “beautiful” (Russian: красивый, - krasivy) have the same root 'крас' (kras). Thus, Red square does not mean the Square of Communists, as many would think, but Beautiful Square. It is a pleasure to think about the Red Elvis as of the Beautiful Elvis, but apparently the nickname means another thing. This name, which is connoted rather negatively for a native speaker of English, could thus be explained as if Dean Reed is somehow the embodiment of the reverse side of the real treasure of American and, more than that, World Culture – the priceless coin called Elvis Presley. By using this line of reasoning it could be therefore derived that here, just like in Hollywood films, one of the guys is definitely bad and the other is definitely good. And there are just two sides of the coin. Who is who depends on the place we are looking from. From the American point of view Elvis Presley would be the good guy, the ideal American and the role model for millions of people across the globe, and the Red Commie Dean Reed would be the bad guy, who denounced and betrayed the United States of America and moved to the enemy. If, however, we look at the coin “Elvis vs. Dean” from the Soviet point of view, the situation changes completely. Here it is Elvis who represents the diabolic American obsession with money and sex, and Dean Reed, the Beautiful Elvis, - the good guy who manages to escape from the Evil State and is fighting for peace. This theory probably looks as false as animated cartoons do, but just like them, it is colored with bright colors and reflects, maybe in a bit exaggerated way, but a true to life picture of how the both

great musicians were seen during the hard years of the Cold War. Impossible to ignore that in the case if Dean Reed is opposed to Elvis rather than compared to him, the mere fact of this opposition proves that Reed is no less important for world culture than Elvis himself. The other side of the coin is still part of the coin and is inalienable.

While it seems that there is all the difference in the world between Dean and Elvis, there are some aspects of their lives that match notably. And the most important thing that they had in common is that they both benefited from their own myth (and at the same were victims of it). In the entire music history there has never existed a performer with a created myth which became larger than life and defined their whole life and music career. Elvis Presley is among the greatest men of their own myth in music history, just like, for example, Michael Jackson. The myth Elvis created developed into what people associated with Elvis at the first place till the end of his days. Elvis was not only a self-made man, but a self-made king, and as Greil Marcus put it in his 1975 book *Mystery Train*, “a self-made man is rather boring, but a self-made king is something else.”¹⁴ He continues:

It is sure a sign that a culture has reached a dead end when it is no longer intrigued by its myths [...] but Elvis has dissolved into a presentation of his myth, and so has his music. [...] History without a myth is surely a wasteland; but myths are compelling only when they are at odds with history. When they replace the need to make history, they are too a dead end, and merely smug. Elvis's performance of his myth is so satisfying to his audience that he is left with no musical identity whatsoever. [...] Elvis is a man whose task is to dramatize the fact of his existence; he does not have to create something new (or try, and fail), and thus test the worth of his existence, or the worth of his audience.¹⁵

This passage is dedicated to Elvis but could also be applied to Dean Reed. It is all the same with the Red Elvis. The only difference is about the myth itself.

¹⁴ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll: Fourth Edition* (Chicago: Plume, 1997), 134.

¹⁵ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll: Fourth Edition* (Chicago: Plume, 1997), 135.

The myth of Presley is American to the backbone. In the same book Marcus gives a rather unflattering description of it:

Dressed in blue, red and white, ultimately in gold, with a Superman cape and covered with jewels no one can be sure are fake, Elvis might epitomize the worst of our culture – he is bragging, selfish, narcissistic, condescending, materialistic to the point of insanity.¹⁶

At the same time Elvis remains a great American, an ideal American. He is the one who made the American Dream come true. The guy to look up to.

Unlike Elvis the King, the Red Elvis does not wear any jewels and has no kinglike outfit. His myth is a completely different story. This myth is not only ideal but also idealistic, and to a great extent naïve. Reed believes in social justice and a better world for everybody. He is certain that music as a bridge between cultures could help to create a a better future for everybody, he does see his mission as the one of a Rock-n-Roll revolutionary. Paradoxically, the myth of Dean Reed is as much originally American as the myth of Elvis. The simple values Reed belauds – justice and freedom – are in fact the essential base of the whole American ideology. Thus, Dean Reed the Freedom Fighter is just as all in all American as Presley is. What went wrong with Dean Reed is that he was probably born in the wrong time, because people at the time needed the myth of Elvis and not the myth of Reed. It seems possible that if Reed were born some 20-30 years later he would have achieved an enormous success worldwide, including the States; first and foremost in the States.

The two myths show us ideal heroes, just like most of myths do. Depending on the prospective, both Elvis and Reed are ideal heroes of their times. But are they both ideal Americans? What is actually the difference between the ideal man and the ideal American? Will Roberts speaking about his documentary film *American Rebel* says: “if you are living outside of America, and you have to create the ideal American character, you would create Dean Reed.”¹⁷ So, Dean Reed is the ideal American character only when seen from the outside. In fact, he was seen as a hero everywhere in the world but as a traitor back home. The few people who were aware of his existence despised him.

¹⁶ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll: Fourth Edition* (Chicago: Plume, 1997), 134.

¹⁷ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

In the documentary *The Red Elvis* there is an episode in which Armin Mueller-Stahl, a German actor and a friend of Reed, states that Dean was “like a toy car that can move in all directions but has to stop at the edge of the table.”¹⁸ By the table he meant FDR but in fact we could apply his words to the whole Soviet Bloc. Dean was free to do what he wanted to, but within the borders of the Bloc. He could not move back to the States, although during the last years of his life he mentioned that possibility. But unlikely for Reed nobody wanted him back home.

Peter Boyles from Denver's Talk Station once put the problem as “I don't think many Americans appreciate people in our country going to the enemy and singing songs.”¹⁹ Odd as it sounds, Dean was hated not only for the fact that he spoke against the U.S. foreign policy, but also because of the fact that he simply preferred making career somewhere else, outside of his homeland. In the very same documentary film there is a short fragment of one of Boyles' live radio shows where he receives a call from an ordinary American citizen and asks him to share his ideas about Dean Reed the Rebel and the fact that he denounced the United States of America. Here is the insignificantly rephrased fragment of the conversation:

Peter Boyles: This is Walt. Walt, good morning, you're on KHOW Radio.

Walt: Hello.

Peter Boyles: So how did you feel when he denounced the US and defected?

Walt: Uhhh... I was not political at those times...

Peter Boyles (interrupts): No, but I am asking you now.

Walt: I think he had his own beliefs just like everybody else in the world does...

Peter Boyles (interrupts): That's not what I ask you.

Walt: Ah. So what you ask me?

Peter Boyles: How do you feel about him going to the Soviet Union? To East Germany? And he denounced the United States.

Walt: He kept his citizenship and I think...

Peter Boyles (interrupts): It's not what I ask you, Walt. Try it again. He denounced the United States of America. How do you feel about that?

¹⁸ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

¹⁹ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

Walt: I don't like the idea that he did denounce the United States...

Peter Boyles nods approvingly.

Walt (continues): but he kept his citizenship and I think he intended to come back and become an American citizen.

Peter Boyles: How do you think he pays taxes?

Walt: I can't answer this for him, I just... I don't know.

Peter Boyles (sneering): Take a guess.

Walt: Well, I think he felt like his career was elsewhere. I think that's basically what he was into.

Peter Boyles: So you think he just flipped over and came to the Soviet Union just for his own career? Do you think he meant it?

Walt: I think so.

Peter Boyles: So he was an opportunist?

Walt: I think you are right.²⁰

It is interesting to notice how Boyles interrupts the caller as soon as the latter starts saying something Boyles does not agree with and does not want to be on air. Dean Reed is not wanted, and there is no excuse for his behavior. This is the message Peter Boyles wants to deliver to the listeners of the radio station.

It is possible to hypothesize that if Reed could foresee how the things would turn out, he would have never left the States or at least refrain from the excessive criticism of the States. There is probably nothing worse than being famous and cherished in the whole world but despised and seen as a failure and a traitor in the home town. But Dean Reed jumped with both feet into his rebellion, mainly because he was a great dreamer. The American Dreamer outside of America. He truly believed that a better world was possible, and one had to struggle for it. The Red Elvis believed in the magic power of revolution and protest just like a child believes in Santa Claus: from top to bottom. The golden American boy fresh from Hollywood was in his early twenties when he first went to South America and "saw poor people crawling on their bellies with their last little bit of something for the church."²¹ Reed became a revolutionary and remained such till the end of his days. All his life was dedicated to his dream – "to make world a better place

²⁰ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

for other people.”²² Except for this life-long dream of Reed he presumably had another one – to become someone, to be famous and to achieve some success as artist and musician. The good old all-American Dream of becoming someone was realized both by Presley and Reed. Sad but true, Reed is still nothing but a failure in the eyes of American people; and he cannot be considered successful because the American Dream cannot be realized outside of America. This is the first and the most important tricky aspect of it: the American dream is for America; it is to be fulfilled first in America, and then worldwide, but not vice versa, and in no circumstances by avoiding the States.

“Why nobody knows Dean Reed in America?” - poses the question Will Roberts and gives an answer then and there: “If the Americans can't make a profit of it you are not going to hear of anybody. Right? You are not going to hear about any Russian singers, you are not going to hear about any Chilean singers. It is going to slide of the tough line wall of this culture that couldn't figure out how to make profit of Dean Reed.”²³ The tough line wall Roberts is talking about is as thick and dense and the Iron Curtain. In fact, it is practically the same thing. And just like the Berlin Wall proves the existence of the imaginary Iron Curtain, the phenomenon of Dean Reed proves the existence of no less imaginary “tough line wall”. While Elvis remained behind it, Reed went outside, and from then on the door for him remained closed.

Despite the sometimes obvious and sometimes less differences and likenesses in the fate and fame of the two great musicians, it is clear that both Elvis Presley and Dean Reed have a huge impact on music history. They occupy different niches in it, but they were both revolutionary artists and ideal heroes who had changed the way people looked at music, at each other, at universal values. Was Dean Reed labeled the Red Elvis only because he was as much popular as Presley, or was there another deeper meaning behind the nick name, it is hard to underestimate his talent and his contribution to Rock-n-Roll. Elvis and Reed, the two phenomena, so different and so similar, will always remain at the very top in the hierarchy of the greatest musicians of the Twentieth century.

²¹ “Dean Reed,” Contemporary Musicians, E-notes, accessed October 12, 2011
<http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-musicians/reed-dean-biography>

²² Quoted from William Roberts, *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

²³ *The Red Elvis*, dir. L. Grün, Germany, 2007

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