

## Music from the Pavement

The 1990s were the time of the “Bazaar Republic”. In the economic reality today, bazaars, market squares and marketplaces of all kinds are still part of the urban fabric in Poland, but they are merely an alternative--not always an attractive one at that—to supermarkets and shopping centres. “The Bazaar Republic” has been supplanted by “The Mall Republic”. Even so, the bazaars of the 1990s were more than just another spot on the urban map. The pavement retail grew rapidly, often outside any official oversight. Often enough, the quality of the goods purchased was also pavement-level. Bazaars became an expression of the mentality of Polish women and men in the early 1990s. A bazaar-ish, homespun, sometimes downright cheapo, pirated mindset, coupled with the cacophony of the marketplace voices, sounds and goods stacked on the bonnets of cars. This is how popular culture was experienced at the time.

Music was the predominant theme of my trips to bazaars and marketplaces. I vividly remember the folding plastic tables and blankets spread on the ground to display audio cassettes. They combined into a collage of overlapping layers of boxes and covers. A tape recorder was an obligatory feature there, used by the seller to present samples of his wares, usually blasting disco polo into the ears of the involuntary listeners. For me, such bazaar stalls were an opportunity to browse through new releases, available primarily on tapes. The latter continued to function in Poland beyond the 1990s, but it was then, in the early years of broad availability, that the cassette became something more than just a medium for young Poles. It was the key to a boundless musical world.

The cassette tape is an inconspicuous symbol of the democratic changes in Poland, both positive and negative. In the early 1990s, the bazaar economy and bazaar mentality were not irrelevant to the history of the cassette itself or the access to Western music. The political shift gave home-grown entrepreneurs the opportunity to market merchandise which had been either difficult to obtain or completely unavailable. Simultaneously, people were unfamiliar with the modern rules applicable to distribution of audio and video content or ignored them altogether. The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry estimated that in 1993 approximately 90% of the music material distributed in Poland was pirated.

This kind of domestic music industry flourished most fully at bazaars and marketplaces, with piles upon piles of primitive copies of albums or hit compilations made by the seller. They came with a “pavement-quality” cover which, besides the gaudy caption “The Best Of” or “Summer 199...”, drew the eyes of the passers-by with an image of an attractive woman and random embellishments such as the sea, palm trees or boats.

Nevertheless, there is a positive aspect to the bazaar-ness and pavement-ness of the audio cassette, and—in effect—of popular music in the 1990s Poland. Bazaars were centres that nurtured musical interests of young people. Going there to buy new cassettes, exchanging them with friends or making own copies and compilations became virtually a daily practice for the adolescent enthusiasts, lending a democratic dimension to music use. The cassette tape epitomized the analog nature of music, now considered coarse sound-wise and technically limited. It was cheap and compelled people to physically travel somewhere—usually on foot—to get music, wander between the stalls which sold it and finally wander with music. Portable cassette players became more desirable than Lego or jeans. After all, bazaars and bazaar music were made for one who does things on foot—the Walkman!

The 1990s also saw the popularity of the audio cassette wane with the arrival of CDs or the less common, hybrid miniDiscs. However, the gradual departure from tapes in favour of the qualitatively and technologically superior media diminished the substantial and tactile personalness and spontaneity of listening to music on tape. The dominance of the bazaar institution was also coming to an end. Today, the qualitatively inferior yet handy tapes are the stuff of memories of music, as you recall the very pleasure of rewinding them. The crackle and noise of the tapes, the din of the bazaar still harbour the soul of the musical experience of the 1990s.

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Thirty years ago, songs were recorded on cassette tapes. These tapes were sold outdoors, often on blankets spread out on the sidewalk. Such places were called bazaars or marketplaces. The sellers recorded the songs onto the cassettes themselves and created their own cassette covers. This was against the law. The music quality wasn't very good. Besides the songs, you could hear noise and crackling. To buy a cassette, people had to search for it at

the bazaars. Sometimes, people recorded songs on cassettes themselves and exchanged them with others. This way, they discovered music from other countries.