

EZEK A FIATALOK. The First Hungarian Beat Movie (1967)

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On a summer afternoon in 1967, Balatonlelle was preparing for an unusual event. Contrary to the common practice of selecting a well-known cinema of Budapest, the premiere of the new Hungarian music film, EZEK A FIATALOK [THESE YOUNGSTERS] was scheduled in the unknown open-air film theatre of this small village resort by Lake Balaton, some 140 kilometres away from the capital city.

But in contradiction to the expectations, thousands of people, mostly youngsters, watched the film there during a very short period of time, and later on its popularity expanded further significantly. When the film was screened in film theatres and cultural-educational centres around the country during the following months, the estimated number of viewers hit almost a million. Even though the better part of the early articles and reviews highlighted its weak points, the sheer number of them indicated that the director Tamás Banovich (1925–2015) had found a subject of utmost interest to the entirety of Hungarian society. The extraordinary success and popularity can be explained by the mere fact that within the framework of a simple plot, EZEK A FIATALOK provided a platform for the most prominent contemporary Hungarian beat bands to present their works.

In 1967, more than ten years after the first Elvis films had combined the features of popular music and motion picture, The Beatles already stopped giving concerts, and in the West people were talking about the end of the first phase of traditional beat music and were celebrating the birth of new

genres in pop and rock music. How should one evaluate the significance of EZEK A FIATALOK against this background?

One should look for an answer in the significantly different pathways the development of beat music followed in the East and West. Even though Western popular culture started leaking through the Iron Curtain during the early 60s, the breakthrough into the public which was dominated and controlled by the state party and its satellites, was yet to come in 1967. Before 1965, knowledge about the new trends was extremely limited. The young Hungarian generation tried to paint a picture of Western popular music from mere fragments by listening to smuggled records and illegal radio channels. The early beat bands restricted themselves to the reproduction of Western hits (Ryback 1990, 88–89).¹ Rock'n'roll and beat songs were rarely featured in the programmes of the single radio channel of the country that were dedicated to popular music, and foreign records were unavailable in the shops. International hits could reach the audience by covers of some new guitar bands in club concerts or by low quality EPs which were published in limited numbers. Those interested in beat music had no alternative to reading *Magyar Ifjúság* (Hungarian Youth), a paper controlled by the Communist Youth Association, or *Ifjúsági Magazin* (Youth Magazine), published monthly since late 1965, a periodical similar to the German *Bravo* and the Soviet *Rovesnik* (Ignácz 2013, 7–17). But both of these papers retained their animosity towards the beat genre and followed political interests even during the period of relaxation. However, thanks to

¹ See alternatively my interviews with the most important Hungarian pop musicians at the website of the Archives and Research Group for 20th-21st Century Hungarian Music (AHM), Hungarian Academy of Sciences, <http://zti.hu/mza/index.htm?m0703.htm>.

its proliferation via informal channels, Western beat music rapidly became part of everyday life in socialist Hungary (Ryback 1990, 96ff).

But even the privileged few who could afford to frequent the beat concerts in university clubs and cultural centres, mainly in the capital Budapest, had no more than mere acoustic experiences of modern Western pop music. Visual knowledge was almost non-existent. For the large majority, visual information was restricted to the photos published in the *Ifjúsági Magazin* and the covers of records. The genre almost never appeared on television. Pop music and the film industry developed a close partnership in the West from the very beginning, but such a partnership left the East almost completely unaffected. It should be emphasised that even though music could be reproduced and copied on tape, such technical possibilities were still missing in the case of motion pictures. During the post-war decades, visual information was accessible only by cinematic and televisual distribution.

Featuring Hungarian beat bands on screen was something out of the ordinary which was restricted to the finals of some talent shows. Nevertheless, the rare occasions contributed to their countrywide reputation and provided a good foundation for their growing fame.

The first *Táncdalfesztivál* (Dance Music Festival) in 1966, which provided a platform for beat bands and attracted millions of viewers, may be considered a turning point in this respect. Illés, a beat band that subsequently played a central role in the movie *EZEK A FIATALOK*, came second in this contest after a band representing traditional dance music genre.

Between 1964 and 1967 representatives of the new pop genre appeared on the cinema screen only a few times. This fact should, nevertheless, be regarded as a significant sign of the relaxation of cultural politics. At this stage, bands were not allowed to play a song of their own, and the plot of the film would remain unaffected by their appearance. In the comedy *KÁR A BENZINÉRT* (A WASTE OF PETROL; H 1955, Frigyes Bán), the band Bergendy, featuring the later lead vocalist of the band Illés, Levente Szörényi, played a predominantly comic song in the Mersey Beat style written for three guitars, percussions and polyphonic vocals by András Bágya. A year later, in 1965 Levente Szörényi appeared once more on screen. In an episode role in *SZERELMES BICIKLISTÁK* (CYCLISTS IN LOVE; H 1965, Péter Bacsó) he performed a song by Szabolcs Fényes, *Táskarádió* (Portable Radio) which fit the profile of Illés well. But to present one of their own songs was still out of question according to the customs of that time. The year 1965 provided yet another example of this sort. In a dance floor scene of the spy film *FÉNY A REDÖNY MÖGÖTT* (LIGHT BEHIND THE SHUTTERS; H 1965, László Nádasy), the band Atlantis was playing a song by Tihamér Vujicsics. Just like in the previous examples, the plot of the film remained completely unaffected by the band's appearance.

The summer of the same year (1966) witnessed the Budapest premiere of *POP GEAR* (UK 1965, Frederic Goode) featuring the top British hits of 1964 and 1965. The film was the first of its kind in Hungarian cinemas which brought The Beatles, The Animals, and Herman's Hermits to the attention of Hungarian viewers who also had the opportunity to sample a taste of the liberal atmosphere of Western concert halls. The list of beat bands on screen before the *EZEK A FIATALOK* comes to an end here. Neither the films of

Elvis Presley and Cliff Richard nor those of The Beatles reached Hungary yet. To say more, it was not until 1968 that the 1967 comedy *MOCNE UDERZENIE* (*BIG BEAT*; H 1967, Jerzy Passendorfer), produced in the fellow Eastern bloc country Poland with beat bands in central roles, arrived in Hungary. *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT* (UK 1964, Richard Lester) featuring The Beatles also opened in Hungarian cinemas in 1968.

Against the background of such circumstances, the question naturally arises: what inspired the director Tamás Banovich to produce a film which was criticised then and now for its illusory nature? What motifs are the most significant for the description of the musical protagonists as well as of the audience in the film? What factors affected the characteristics of the featured songs? Let me consider the question concerning the roots of *EZEK A FIATALOK* first which provide multiple, though interrelated answers. Due to the lack of comparative materials, interpreting *EZEK A FIATALOK* in the context of the history of Hungarian post-war music films is quite problematic. Music is seriously underrepresented on screen during that period, despite the fact that enduring fame required visual representation of protagonists singing great hits. Music in Hungarian feature films remained on the periphery and was accidental. Only the predominantly musical film genres of the operetta and the dialogue-free dance films, one of the most celebrated directors of which was Tamás Banovich provided a platform for music on screen, though in a completely different context.

We should not forget that the products of Western mass culture and entertainment were outlawed in public media until the early-mid-60s. It is therefore not surprising that in the years before *EZEK A FIATALOK*, genres emerging from jazz and rock and roll, which had themselves been prohibited and despised, were not reflected upon in the film scores apart from the few

examples mentioned above. To take a further step, apart from film scores, such genres appeared in screen scripts only a very few times during these years, all of which were displayed with utmost despise and sarcasm.

One of these is the 1950 DALOLVA SZÉP AZ ÉLET (SINGING MAKES LIFE BEAUTIFUL; 1950, Márton Keleti) from the Stalinist era. This film celebrated the triumph and superiority of the mass song of the labour movement. The anti-hero of the film is Swing Tóni, a jampec (a teddy boy), who, despising hard work, spends his time in dance schools and pubs, and, as suggested by his name, is a great fan of swinging.

A second film featuring Western music genres in script is also from before the 1956 revolution. The 1955 EGY PIKOLÓ VILÁGOS (A HALF PINT OF BEER) by Félix Máriássy is the love story of Marci Kincse, celebrated as a Stakhanovist worker and an exceptional soldier, and Julika Cséri, who is attracted by a decadent jampec community in the absence of his lover. Returning from the front, Marci has to fight hard to divert Julika from the wrong path. Eventually, she realises the superfluity and void of the dancing world. The central scene of the film features a song performed by Margit Lukácsi and the Nabuló Band the recurring lyrics of which is also illuminating:

Belzebub lánya vagyok én, zöld nylonruhában főzöm a
pokol fenekén a kását. Keverem-kavarom, zsibbad már a
karom. Arról szól a dalom, hogy hogy kerültem a földről
ide át.

(I am the daughter of Beelzebub, I am cooking porridge
at the bottom of hell in green nylon dress. I am stirring
and stirring, my arms are growing numb. My song tells
my journey from above to here.)

The early works of Tamás Banovich, all of them dance films with one exception, were produced in the same period as DALOLVA SZÉP AZ ÉLET and EGY PIKOLÓ VILÁGOS. During my extended interview about his life and work, Banovich told that he had chosen the dance film genre because he had experienced the folklore renaissance advocated by the socialist regime, and because he had considered those films the least dangerous in which no word could be heard. He was absolutely right. The aforementioned exception is his ELTÜSSZENTETT BIRODALOM (AN EMPIRE SNEEZED AWAY) which was produced in the autumn of 1956. This children's film about a tyrannical king and his empire full of corruption and intrigues granted a ten-year silence to Banovich.

He was put on track again by the 1965 dance film AZ ÉLETBE TÁNCOLTATOTT LÁNY (THE GIRL REVIVED BY DANCE) which earned him a Cannes technical award and, most importantly, the assignment of making a film report about the French tour of the Hungarian National Folk Ensemble. During a six-month shooting in France, Banovich encountered the Western beat culture. He made significant efforts to watch all films related to beat music available in the Parisian cinemas including those of The Beatles which he admitted to have been a great influence on his own work.² He had been frequenting beat concerts in Hungary for some time, and so the French journey was only the last push towards the idea of integrating international and domestic trends by making a feature film about the contemporary world view and social problems of the young generation which also makes the <voice of the young generation>, i. e. beat music be heard.

² See my interview with the director (AHM, 2013).

His beat movie may not be a ›pure‹ documentary, but there is no reason to criticise Banovich for his selection of a hybrid genre. In the aforementioned interview, Banovich let me know that it was not only for the sake of contemporary trends that he had selected a fictitious framework, but he had also considered the documentary genre too dangerous for the presentation of the Hungarian beat movement. *EZEK A FIATALOK* is a film of a restrained director with a bad record. It was not opposed straight away by the supreme bodies of cultural politics, but neither did Banovich want to irritate anyone with his film. He bore in mind the Hungarian public taste which had serious reservations against beat music; he made concessions to the adult society which was continuously criticising the dealings of the young generation; and he also provided positive answers to those questions which were considered most important by the state party.

The film depicts beat music as entertainment for the sake of entertainment, and the performance and reception of the music as fully compatible with the socialist ideals and morals. It tells the naive story of the 18-year-old László Koroknai who is about to take his A-level exams and considering his career options. The generational conflicts between adults and teenagers are treated uncritically and are rather eliminated than solved. The father easily accepts and understands László's decision of becoming a skilled worker rather than going to university, and in one of the final scenes he also joins his fellow adults in giving a standing ovation to László who turns out to be successful as a beat musician as well. The music and lyrics of László and his fellow musicians deliver a message to the adult society about the coming of a new age in which the youth should be taken seriously.

As long as we may reasonably believe that the story only provides a pretext for presenting the beat songs themselves, one could assume that the director

has incorporated the film's message into the twelve songs which had allegedly been composed at the full discretion of the featured bands. However, the very selection of these bands affects the picture displayed concerning Hungarian beat music. *EZEK A FIATALOK* should be appreciated nevertheless inasmuch as it managed to bring together the three most important contemporary bands, Illés, Metró and Omega (the so-called «Trinity»), and the three most important contemporary female voices, Zsuzsa Koncz, Katalin Kovács and Cecília Zalatnay.

Banovich apparently endeavoured to create a film which, on the one hand, could describe the universal trend of generational conflicts and its Hungarian manifestation, and which, on the other hand, might attempt to ease the reservations of a predominantly conservative adult society against the unstoppable cultural developments which were most apparent in pop music. In order to do so, the film had to alleviate or completely eliminate those factors of beat (rashness, anti-regime lyrics, rascal fans, Western fashion phenomena, etc.) which annoyed the state party and the adult society the most and which provided representatives of Marxist-Leninist ideology with ample reasons to berate the new genre. It was probably for these reasons that Banovich decided to include the »Trinity« of the three bands that had proven their musical capability and had already managed to reach a compromise with the system. Banovich also decided to give a priority to Illés, which endeavoured to create a type of urban folklore by combining traits of the tolerated beat genre with those of the administratively promoted folk music. An overwhelming ten songs (out of twelve in total) featured in the film were actually written by Illés. Having managed to overcome the administrative obstacles during a period of conflicts and negotiations with the regime, the lucky few bands considered that they should make a compromise in their music. In order to keep the

genre alive, these bands had to create a broad variety of music to satisfy all generations and social groups.

We should now turn briefly to the audience assisting the concert scenes of the film, and raise the question whether they indeed felt the permissive atmosphere and whether they indeed intended to show up well-combed and well-dressed to enjoy the concerts with discipline and attention more befitting classical rather than beat music.

Let us quote a short scene from the film which, I believe, illustrates well the aforementioned problems (01:17:04–01:21:24). In the final scene of the film, the protagonist László Koroknai and his enthusiastic amateur band performs the song *Sárga rózsza* (Yellow Rose) by Illés. The lyrics of this song might sound meaningful or even provocative to the adults sitting among the rows including László's father himself:

Jóbarátom, tudod-e hogy miért nem meri soha senki
beismerni azt, hogy ha elmúlt az, amiben hittünk, az, ami
olyan szép volt, vissza sose tér. Azt hiszem, rájöttem már
– oh igen. Gondolkozz el, nem nehéz, oh nem

(My friend, do you know why no one is ready to admit, if
something we believed in has passed, if something so
nice returns never again.)

The serious message is accompanied by jolly tunes with elements of contemporary pop music and folk motifs. The performance and the volume are rather diffident and reserved. The performers themselves are short-haired young gentlemen in suits and ties who play without moving around on stage and with no apparent sign of passion. Their audience is made up of likewise well-dressed people listening attentively to the performance in

silence. Next to the director sits the protagonist's father, his primary supporter in the film. He both understands and accepts the social and cultural change communicated by the song of his son who represents the entire Hungarian youth.

I think that this is not a documentary picture. We may reasonably assume that the beat concerts in contemporary Hungarian clubs were more spontaneous, and even though performers and their audience complied with a certain dress code and some rules of social behaviour, songs were evidently performed much louder and more energetically, and they were received more passionately than depicted in *EZEK A FIATALOK*.

The film was criticised for similar reasons then. Many of its reviewers claimed that its visual and music were too restrained and moderate.³ What is missing then? Did the viewers indeed miss the provocatively dressed bands which were experimenting with the newest genres and trends and which were performing their songs with utmost passion and with complete disregard to public taste? Did the reviewers indeed miss the likes of Béla Radics who is imitating Jimi Hendrix in an 1968 amateur recording?⁴

Unlikely. It may well be that such performances were inconceivable to be brought to screen in Hungary in 1967, but the genre was still struggling to receive administrative recognition. The songs composed during this period reflect the atmosphere of those presented in *EZEK A FIATALOK*. It is enough to note that in 1966–1967, Béla Radics, who later became the «daredevil» of

³ E. g. *EZEK A FIATALOK*. Magyar revüfilm, *Magyar Nemzet*, 20.07.1967.; *Mozgó Kedvencek*, *Magyar Ifjúság*, 22.07.1967.; *Gitáros Ifjúság*, *Élet és Irodalom*, 22.07.1967.; *EZEK A FIATALOK*, *Filmvilág*, 01.08.1967.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKBvGAtWSA>.

Hungarian guitar rock, was performing traditional beat music in Atlantis, one of the tolerated bands.

The same goes for the audience. Beat music had to receive, so to say, ‹state permit› so that the young generation could enjoy the music in a more relaxed environment and so that the authorities and the conservative public taste could be convinced that this is all about music and ‹these youngsters› would not want to overthrow the socialist order. Banovich, who considered his film trustworthy almost a century after its production, was probably right in not risking the film’s forbiddance. As long as he decided against the comedy or satire genres, he was right to build on the tranquil teenager stereotype who respects the dress code and rules of social behaviour of his time, rather than on the decadent jampec stereotype of the films from 1950s. Even though groups of trouble makers are therefore ‹eliminated› from his film, he still managed to preserve some aspects of the Hungarian beat concerts of 1966-1967 – not of 1968 or a later period.

In order to have full access to musical and visual sources necessary for further development and innovation, the genre had to overcome a hostile public opinion. From a historical perspective, the extreme moderation of EZEK A FIATALOK was even beneficial to the beat genre as the reviews indicated that a more authentic and more courageous presentation would be preferred. On the one hand, the first Hungarian beat movie probably failed to fulfil its task of describing the real conditions and opportunities of the Hungarian beat genre; on the other hand, according to Banovich, the very set of compromise the film reached won the very ‹state permit› the genre required to stay alive.⁵

⁵ See my interview with the director (AHM, 2013).

In conclusion, EZEK A FIATALOK can be considered the necessary first step towards the development of the new pop genres and also towards the visual representation of Hungarian pop culture. In the years following EZEK A FIATALOK, foreign music films reached Hungarian cinema screens, prominent Hungarian bands gave concerts in Western Europe (such as the 1968 concerts of the band Omega in England), and in 1969, a second beat movie entitled EXTÁZIS 7-TÖL 10-IG (EXTASY FROM 7 TILL 10) by András Kovács could reformulate the subject in a documentary and report-film style for the satisfaction of a broader audience.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

Ignácz, Ádám: EZEK A FIATALOK. The First Hungarian Beat Movie (1967). In: *Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung* 12 (2016), S. 219–233, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59056/kbzf.2016.12.p219-233>.

Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung (ISSN 1866-4768)

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