

András Kappanyos
“All Together Now”: The Translatability of the Popular Song in Socialist Hungary

Intro

The subtitle of this paper refers to two distinct but interrelated ideas. One is the possibility of the actual translation (linguistic transcoding) of the actual popular song; the other is the adaptability of a complex cultural phenomenon into a very different cultural, political, and linguistic context. My hope is that the first, narrower perspective will help us understand the details and scope of the whole process in the second, broader approach as well.

One of the main operative devices of this paper is the distinction between “old-style” entertainment music as it appeared in the early years of the twentieth century and “new-style,” generational popular music as it emerged with the “invention” of rock and roll in the mid-fifties. In the absence of an internationally accepted terminology for this distinction, this paper will apply the terms that were commonly used in Hungary at the most critical period of this cultural transfer, the mid-1960s. Characteristically, the Hungarian language adopted two loanwords for the purpose: *beat* for the “new style” and *sláger* (from German Schlager¹) for the “old style.” Naturally, these terms do not create absolutely clear-cut categories, but they will serve us well in our pragmatic purposes while indicating the locality of this distinction.

The adaptation process, viewed from the outside, can be considered a relative success story: Hungarian beat, pop, and rock music has become an important thread in the texture of national culture, it produced its own stars, and its impact ~~crossed~~ reaches beyond political and ethnic boundaries. To some extent, it even managed to distinguish itself from the forms of traditional entertainment music (*sláger*) and take on some (albeit rather timid) elements of a “generation revolt.” One must keep in mind that this adaptation process took place in a dictatorship, even if it was often called “the happiest barrack” by Western commentators,² who referred to Hungary as the most enlightened and least oppressive of the East Central European state socialist regimes. This cultural transfer was a complex, multifaceted process, involving several subsystems of both the local Hungarian and a globalizing Anglophone culture. Cultural patterns on different scales had to be negotiated to integrate into the new context. This essay focuses on these negotiation processes: the obstacles encountered and the ways in which they were (at least partly) overcome and the modes of operation that were worked out.

The difficulty of this undertaking is that the story itself has multiple threads. Our initial concern is the problem where a complex cultural entity deeply rooted in the English language is to be transferred into the context of a non-Indo-European language. But this cannot be discussed without considering the tension between the interests of autonomous creative power and those of the entertainment industry. This unsolved core problem of popular music gets further complicated in the state-socialist context, where decisions concerning genre are deeply affected by the interests of political control. Here there is the problem of control itself, where a cultural complex that originated in a liberal democracy is transferred to the context of a state-socialist soft dictatorship. The unravelling of a few intertwined threads can hopefully lead to a ~~an~~ deeper understanding ~~of some deeper connections~~.

The two Faces of Speedy Gonzales: Questions of Genre, Authenticity and Coolness

¹ The English Wikipedia entry on Schlager music might be helpful here: “a catchy instrumental accompaniment to vocal pieces of pop music with simple, happy-go-lucky, and often sentimental lyrics.”

² The expression came into use in the early 1960s, the first Hungarian reference to it dates from 1966, in an emigrant journal: Gombos, Gyula: “Húsz év után (Nyílt levél Mircse Zoltánhoz)”. *Új Látóhatár* 3, 1966, p. 202.

There is a fundamental contradiction lying at the core of modern popular music. On the one hand, it is linked – if not in its direct origin, at least in its functions and traditions – to spontaneously generated, authentic folk music, while on the other, its mode of production follows the alienating mechanisms of the entertainment industry based on the division of labor, profit maximization, and, above all, technical reproducibility. Beat and pop-rock music are prone to the mechanisms described in Walter Benjamin's visionary essay.³ Popular music, like cinema, can only access authenticity through autonomy: when an artist (or a very tightly cooperating, creative community, such as a band) gains total control over the entirety of their creative process. In a performative (therefore temporal) art form, authenticity – or, in Benjamin's terminology, *aura* – can be gained through uniqueness, unrepeatability. In the world of popular music, even at the technical level, there are clear tendencies that strive for *aura*. For instance, every major guitarist works out their unique and instantly recognizable sound. Conversely, there are tendencies that work in the opposite direction (uniformity, conformism, repeatability), such as the application of Auto-Tune or drum machines. The problem with the esthetic evaluation of popular music is that these tendencies remain present in the same cultural pool: there is no clear division between popular music that aspires to be appreciated and judged as autonomous, or even activist, art, and popular music that just wants to entertain and be paid for entertaining.⁴ It would be very tempting to draw the line between old-style and new-style popular music on the basis of this opposition; the former never poses as genuine art, while the latter sometimes does. But then, there are many agents and products of new-style popular music that never even considered artistic ambitions. Thus, the line of division lies elsewhere.

New-style popular music is based on a generational subculture. A subculture mainly defined by age strives for separation from the other generations. It is not enough that the music of a generation should appeal to that generation: it needs to be objectionable or appalling or annoying to other generations, especially to that of their parents, an age group that also encompasses most politicians, businessmen, generals, and other people in power. While it is not our aspiration here to provide a sociological explanation⁵ for this revolt (or rather, series of revolts), we have to see that exclusivity is a main factor of the whole phenomenon. Any new cultural object (such as a song, a performer, or a fashionable look) seeking admission into the circle is judged by the shibboleth of coolness. The criteria of coolness are very dynamic and very discursive. The distinctive features between mod and rocker subcultures, for instance, are easier to describe in terms of haircuts and motorcycle types than in musical terms (e. g. rhythmic patterns, harmonies, arrangements). This type of distinction seems very superficial from the outside, but from the inside, it can be a question of life or death.⁶ And loving something other people hate also involves hating anything they like – especially *sláger* music. Just as in the case of football fans, these distinctive features define the identity of the members, something that old-style music does not do.

In old-style popular music, as it was known in the first half of the twentieth century, the primary aim was pleasantness. The more people found a song pleasant, the more successful it became. In the second half of the century, after the first “[generational](#) revolt” (associated with rock and roll), paradoxically, a song or a performer could gain supporters by being pleasant to the target audience and unpleasant to everyone else. Being frowned upon by the elders became

³ Benjamin, Walter: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. *Grey Room* 39, 2010, pp. 11–38.

⁴ The problem has been assessed by Szemere, Anna: “Some Institutional Aspects of Pop and Rock in Hungary”. *Popular Music* 3, 1983, pp. 121–142.

⁵ For an in-depth overview, see Bennett, Andy: “Towards a Cultural Sociology of Popular Music”. *Journal of Sociology* 44(4), 2008, pp. 419–432.

⁶ The clash of the two youth subcultures of 1960s Britain was so substantial that it gave rise to the sociological term “moral panic,” cf. Cohen, Stanley: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Routledge: London, New York, 2002.

an important point of appeal. In this sense, beat, pop, and rock songs need to be divisive, they are supposed to have some sort of edge.

As far as the songs themselves are concerned, the criteria of coolness are not always embodied that clearly. The discursive nature of these judgements can be demonstrated with the strange controversy surrounding the reception of Pat Boone's 1961 hit *Speedy Gonzales*,⁷ which seems to have arrived in Hungary via two different cultural channels. One is depicted in Péter Gothár's excellent 1982 movie, *Megáll az idő* (Time Stands Still),⁸ which tells a story about the teenagers of the early 1960s in very realistic detail. In one scene, a handwritten phonetical transliteration of the *Speedy Gonzales* lyrics is passed around among schoolmates; it is considered a valuable item that makes someone able to sing along and thus participate more closely in the inherent coolness of the song. But this is not a typical rock and roll tune, more of a novelty song; in reality it was also accessible via the channel of more conventional consumption. In fact, it was translated to Hungarian and performed by a traditional *sláger* singer without the slightest trace of coolness.⁹ Probably this uncool presence killed off all coolness attributed to the song. And all this happened in a context where, in all likelihood, neither party knew about the existence of the cartoon mouse or the ethnic stereotypes it played on. The act of translation domesticates and neuters a song, depriving it of its mystery, of its inherent coolness. In effect, it makes it accessible to anyone, including the generation of elders, so it is simply no fun anymore. The untranslated status is a token of exclusivity, even if that means it remains incomprehensible to the "in-group" as well.

Any translation is a sort of repetition or copying: a translated text, even in literature, moves farther from the original inspiration and loses a great portion of its authenticity. Additionally, in the public opinion of the Kádár Era, there was a strong distaste for "secondary quality." Many of the everyday goods available to the public, from soft drinks to cars, were (often slightly outdated) knock-offs of Western products, and everybody knew that a Polski Fiat was not a real Fiat. That experience served as a strong repellent against making something secondary from something that is accessible in its primary form. Paradoxically, translatability provides us with a rather well-defined distinctive feature between old-style and new-style popular music: *sláger* songs seem to be very translatable while beat songs do not.

The successful translation of a song means that in the Hungarian version, it gets a cultural status that is approximately the local equivalent of its original or international status. This relative equivalence is quite common among old-style *sláger* songs. There are several compilation LPs featuring "World Hits in Hungarian" ("Világslágerek magyarul"), and in some cases the local popularity of such translations might even exceed that of their originals. Lounge musicians (those who play in restaurants or can be hired for weddings) have an inexhaustible repertoire of such songs. Here are some (markedly non-English) examples:

original song	original performer	Hungarian performer
<i>Piange... il telefono</i> (The Phone Cries)	Domenico Modugno	János Koós ¹⁰
<i>Миллион роз</i> (One Million Roses)	Alla Pugachova	Kata Csongrádi ¹¹
<i>Lady Carneval</i>	Karel Gott	György Korda ¹²

⁷ Boone, Pat: *Speedy Gonzales*. Dot Records – 45-16368, 1962.

⁸ Written by Géza Bereményi and Péter Gothár, 1982.

⁹ Koós, János: *Speedy Gonzales*. Qualiton – EP 7250, 1963.

¹⁰ Modugno, Domenico (with Francesca Guadagno): *Piange... il telefono*. Carosello – CI 20390, 1975; Koós, János: *Koós 4. Favorit* – SLPM 17806, 1983.

¹¹ Pugachova, Alla: *Million Roz*. Melodiya – C62—18531-32, 1982; Csongrádi, Kata: *Millió rózsaszál*. Pepita – SLPM 37022, 1986.

¹² Gott, Karel: *Lady Carneval*. Polydor – 53 090, 1969; Korda, György: *Lady Carneval*. Qualiton – SP 588, 1969.

This phenomenon hardly ever occurs with new-style songs. Of course, there are some exceptions. The Hungarian version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, for instance, is very popular (especially the rendering by János Kulka),¹³ but it is a very unusual song with an extremely adaptable chorus that does not require translation, and it is somewhat peripheral to the beat-pop-rock domain anyway.

In the Shadows: Things to Do Instead of Translations

The translation process of a beat song ~~fully~~ carried through with success would ~~possibly~~ require a performer of similar style and (local) status to play the translated song. Several Hungarian performers emulated their Western predecessors or contemporaries, especially The Beatles. For instance, Illés, the most prominent and paradigmatic of the early Hungarian bands and the pioneers of original Hungarian beat songs, wore Sgt. Pepper-style retro-military costumes around 1968,¹⁴ published a white album with no title in 1971,¹⁵ experimented with the sound of the sitar, and so on, but there is no trace in their recorded portfolio of any attempt to translate a Beatles song. Another group of national prominence, Hungária, in one of its several line-ups, worked as a straightforward Beatles tribute band. In the late 1970s, the four members took on the respective roles, including the mop-top hairstyle and silk jackets, and played Lennon & McCartney songs from the earlier period note by note, alternating with their own Beatles-style compositions in Hungarian.¹⁶ Yet even they did not try to directly adapt a song in the linguistic sense – although it could be argued that the early Beatles lyrics would not be worth the effort anyway. We can conclude that beat songs strongly resist translation.¹⁷ But their lyrics already caused difficulties for the adaptation process even before the idea of translating them had been considered.

The phenomenon of beat music and its generational counterculture entered Hungary around 1963–65. The cultural baggage of the adaptation process included rhythms, arrangements, instruments, clothing, accessories, hairstyles, dance steps, and a host of other acoustic, visual, and behavioral elements. However, the linguistic element caused a serious concern. Very few people spoke English (rather, everyone was taught Russian as a foreign language at school), so the songs that were at the heart of the whole “movement” could not play out their full potential. Singing along in any meaningful sense was out of the question; even the performers themselves often just imitated English words. The solution to the problem was eventually the introduction of original Hungarian songs, but in the meantime, performers experimented with different approaches.

The easiest solution to the problem of lyrics was playing instrumentals. In 1963–64, when The Shadows ~~were~~ was at the height of its career, a band without its own lead singer seemed conceivable. Cultural functions of the new-style music had not yet ~~become~~ separatecrystallized, and the main performance opportunity for early Hungarian beat bands was to play at dance parties organized at college clubs or restaurants. They played the new type of music, but the social framework of their performances copied that of earlier swing combos or folk-style dance bands: instrumental dance pieces alternated with guest appearances by (mainly female) solo singers. Concert-type performances were relatively rare. The very first beat SP, by Illés,¹⁸ represents this type of setup: it contains two English covers (with guest lady singers) and two instrumentals in The Shadows' style. But it was also the singles and the related radio

¹³ Cohen, Leonard: *Hallelujah*. CBS – A-4918, 1984. Kulka, János: *Esti dal*. Sonatina Kft. – SON 1904, 2016.

¹⁴ Retrieved 10.9.2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YuhtoBDeQw>.

¹⁵ Illés: [without title]. Pepita – SLPX 17410, 1971. (Sometimes referred as *Human Rights*).

¹⁶ Cf. Hungária: *Beatles-láz*. Gong – HCD 37425, 1997.

¹⁷ One of the most convincing examples of translation's de-cooling effect is probably the Soviet version of *Let it Be*, retrieved 9.10.2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XA21ayPua78>.

¹⁸ Illés Zenekar: *Long Tall Sally*. Qualiton – EP 7297, 1964.

presence that made bands quickly realize the importance of branding and the need for a distinctive sound and a recognizable singing voice. Illés began its career as an instrumental and backing band, but it soon recruited its own lead singer and guitarist, Levente Szörényi, who became one of the most important songwriters and performers of the following decades. Szörényi himself provided a few Shadows-style instrumental tracks, but from 1966 on, with the acceptance of original Hungarian songs (both by fans and the authorities), and with the most successful bands leaving the dance-hall-party scene of college clubs and restaurants, this tendency was exhausted.

There are stages in a performer's career where covering well-known songs is a practicable option, and in early-1960s Hungary, with the lack of original native beat songs, it was a natural choice. It should be added that covering a pre-existing song might involve autonomous artistic intention, like when Jimi Hendrix rearranged Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower*;¹⁹ however, early Hungarian covers of English songs did not belong to this category. On the above-mentioned single, *Long Tall Sally* was sung by 18-year-old Zsuzsa Koncz, who later became the most successful solo singer in Hungarian popular music and is still active at the time of my writing. In her interpretation she tried to imitate Little Richard's original rendering: her aim was to make a copy that is accessible to an enthusiastic audience whose options were otherwise very limited. This attitude clearly characterizes a cultural shortage economy: a perceived demand is met by a suboptimal (second or third best) solution rather than the "the real thing." Even if the artists copied "new-type" songs, this approach clearly belonged to the old, established forms and channels of entertainment music. This approach ignores a fundamental value of youth culture: authenticity. Therefore, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to build a brand or someone's own public image in this way.

Before turning to translations, it is worth considering one intermediate option: rewritten lyrics. In the world of musicals and operettas, it used to be a fairly common tactic to keep the musical score and rewrite both the plot and the lyrics. Emmerich Kálmán's *Riviera Girl* became a Broadway sensation with the help of Guy Bolton and P. G. Woodhouse; the original librettist and lyricist of *Die Csárdásfürstin* (Leo Stein and Béla Jenbach) played little part in this.²⁰ This is rather rarely done with pop hit singles, but it does happen sometimes. *River Deep – Mountain High* was originally a Tina Turner hit,²¹ later covered (in the creative sense) by artists as diverse as Deep Purple and Celine Dion. The Hungarian version (unreleased at the time) was performed by Kati Kovács on a TV show sometime in 1967 or 1968.²² She was the perfect choice to match the talents of Tina, if not in stage presence, certainly in singing capabilities. Unfortunately, the song was equipped with new, ballad-like lyrics, with the title *Szomorú lány* (Sad Girl). It is about a girl who once lived happily, but one day her lover vanished and now she is suffering from sadness, seeking a new life. In the punchline, the narrator confesses that the sad girl is she herself. Despite the singer's best efforts, the new text kills the song. The original is an outburst of a love confession: an ecstatic love song, bold enough to evoke childishly simple images, giving the impression of elemental sincerity. The lyrics (and the performance) even convey the moment when one is speechless with emotion. This intensity cannot simply be inverted, with its happiness replaced by sadness. *River Deep – Mountain High* (in its original version) is one of those songs where music and lyrics work together in perfect harmony: the upbeat, hopeful, happy melody and arrangement do not work with a depressive text. There is no need to suspect intentionality here, but in the Hungarian version the ecstatic potential is completely deactivated,

¹⁹ Jimi Hendrix Experience: *All Along the Watchtower*. Track Record – 604025, 1968.

²⁰ Clarke, Kevin: "Kálmán Imre: The Riviera Girl". In: Kékesi Kun, Árpád / Jákfalvi, Magdolna (eds.): *"Hát újra itt..." : Operettkánón és -műfaj*. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Theatron Műhely Alapítvány: Budapest, 2021, pp. 195–207.

²¹ Ike & Tina Turner: *River Deep – Mountain High*. London Records – HLU 10046, 1966.

²² Retrieved 10.9.2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNn4tCK_rW4

and the result is a mediocre, forgettable song. It is no wonder that this method remained marginal in the adaptation process.

Blown in the Wind: “Campfire Versions” and More

~~And thus~~ Finally, we arrive at the topic of actual translations. According to Roman Jakobson, poetry is untranslatable.²³ This impossibility is multiplied when we try to translate songs. The situation is aptly illustrated by a Hungarian duo of musical parodists called Méhek (Bees), who created a version of *Yellow Submarine* by translating the original lyrics word for word.²⁴ The core of the joke is that *submarine* in Hungarian is *tengeralattjáró*, literally “under-sea-goer,” six syllables, which completely ruins the prosody of the song. And there is no sleeker synonym: a landlocked country never needed one. At the same time there was also a campfire-version²⁵ of the song, probably never released, in which the chorus went like this: “Így élünk mind a sárga nagy hajón” (“We all live on the big yellow boat”), which is prosodically perfect, but semantically very inaccurate.

On the part of the Hungarian audience, there was a natural demand to understand the textual content of the songs they liked. In the weekly program guide of the monopolized state radio, the editors tried to aid them by providing translations of the titles of the songs scheduled to be played on the radio stations that week. As a result, we might suspect that the first Beatles song they played on September 20, 1963 was *Please Please Me*, but we cannot be sure, as in the guide the title is translated “Tégy boldoggá,” which back-translates as “Make Me Happy.” Sometimes these translations were unintentionally funny. *Rock around the Clock* is still known in Hungarian as “Rock az óra körül.” This literal translation, ignoring the meaning *all day long*; evokes, instead, the image of someone dancing in a circle around some sort of timepiece. These and similar examples show that the adaptation process was seriously hampered by the language barrier.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, unreleased “campfire versions” of some iconic songs became quite popular. The anti-capitalist and anti-war nature of the 1968 student uprisings and the hippie movement seemed vaguely favorable and therefore tolerable to the more open-minded leaders of Hungarian cultural policy.²⁶ They sought to maintain the anti-capitalist and anti-war orientation (the latter linked exclusively to US involvement in the Vietnam war) and to downplay the more general anti-state and anti-establishment aspects. These campfire versions of Western protest songs could thus be portrayed as supportive of the Eastern, state socialist, pro-peace position. In addition, these songs lent a cool, cheerful, countercultural air to such conformist activities as participation in summer camps for Young Pioneers (in the Soviet sense) or peace-demonstrations (supporting the Party’s foreign policy) organized by KISZ (the Hungarian Communist Youth Association, the equivalent of the Soviet Komsomol). However, these translations consistently defused or neutered the subversive elements of the songs. The Hungarian campfire version of Bob Dylan’s *Blowing in the Wind*²⁷ became a standard at KISZ meetings, but its (prosodically correct) chorus went like this: “A választ, testvér, azt elfújta a szél.” It is almost a literal translation, except that “blowing in the wind” becomes “blown away

²³ Jakobson, Roman: “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”. In: Jakobson, Roman: *Language and Literature*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1987, pp. 428–435.

²⁴ Retrieved 9.10.2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rdcn2GkQ9Oo> (Recorded probably around 2000, unreleased.)

²⁵ I use this term for the widely popular, unreleased Hungarian versions of these songs. Some of these are gathered in the privately published collections of the guitarist-singer duo Bea Muszty and András Dobay (*Gítáriskola* 1990, *Csalamádé* 1–5, 1999/2010) but the authorship of the Hungarian lyrics is unclear.

²⁶ This was favorable only as a genuine criticism of capitalist society, but not tolerable as a way of life. Hungarian “hippies” were constantly harassed by the police. See Csörsz, István: *Sírig tarsd a pofád*. Magvető: Budapest, 1971.

²⁷ Bob Dylan / Pete Seeger / Joan Baez: *Blowing in The Wind*. Fontana – TFE 18010, 1964.

by the wind.” Clearly, the meaning was contaminated with the cultural memory of the Hungarian title of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*: “Elfújta a szél.” While the original implies that the answer is available and obvious to all, the Hungarian version suggests that the answer is postponed, if not lost forever. While Bob Dylan’s song is about imminent change, its Hungarian version assures the listener of the long-term impossibility of change. Nowadays one can find a corrected Hungarian text, with the refrain “fújja már a szél” (“blowing in the wind already”), but in the 1970s, nobody questioned the – otherwise quite plausible – gutted version.

John Lennon’s *Give Peace a Chance*²⁸ suffered similar treatment. The song could be used (or misused) as a symbol of the unity in a desire for peace among the youth of the West and of the East, except that the Hungarian chorus differed ever so slightly: “Mást nem is kérünk / Csak béke legyen,” goes the prosodically correct translation, which, when translated back, reads “All we ask is / Let there be peace.” In this case, the original is a plea or petition to politicians, not without a hint of sarcasm: if they are no longer willing or able actively to promote the cause of peace, they should at least stop obstructing it. The Hungarian version completely lacks this kind of activism or criticism; it simply expresses the general desire for peace, which is not even an opinion, just a totally harmless platitude. Another example of this – partly unintentional – domestication occurs in the finale of *Hair*. The refrain “Let the sunshine in” becomes “Jöjj el, napfény” (“Come, sunshine”).²⁹ Again, while the original clearly calls for some sort of human activity, the Hungarian version directly addresses the sunshine, as if human involvement in the matter would be completely futile or irrelevant. In the latter two cases, the Hungarian versions seem to tend toward the immateriality of prayer (in a non-religious context), eliminating the slightest hint of personal responsibility, commitment, or agency from the speech act.

Some of these translations that took on the role of folk ballads were most probably the works of solo singer-guitarists, who remained largely outside the mainstream, both in terms of genre and success. Some others (like the last one of the three examples above) originated in theatrical works. In musical theater, translations are inevitable: the scope of the form exceeds that of the individual song. A complex narrative has to be presented, and emotional immersion alone is an insufficient device to carry such specific information. Rock musicals (such as *Hair* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*) have played successfully in Hungarian theaters, but these productions did not interact with the outside world: even their most characteristic songs failed to become hits in their Hungarian incarnations. There is one significant exception, but that belongs to the next segment.

Stairway to the Heavside Layer: Two Genuine Triumphs

Two projects that were based on actual, real translations of songs and became successful in the long term are worth special mention. The first is the Hungarian version of *Cats* by József Romhányi. It is not beat music proper, and it is very clearly a product of the mainstream entertainment industry, but as a successful linguistic appropriation of a piece of modern popular music, it stands unparalleled and is thus worth discussing. *Cats* is by far the most successful of the translated musicals and it managed to spawn several Hungarian hit songs, most notably the equivalent of *Memory*. The 1983 premiere in Madách Theater, Budapest, was only the third after West End and Broadway, and thus the first foreign-language rendering. Of course, T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* had been translated to several languages, but that is not the same as translating the songs in a singable way. Consider the first chorus of the poem *Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat*:

He gives one flash of his glass-green eyes

²⁸ Plastic Ono Band: *Give Peace a Chance*. Apple Records – 1809, 1969.

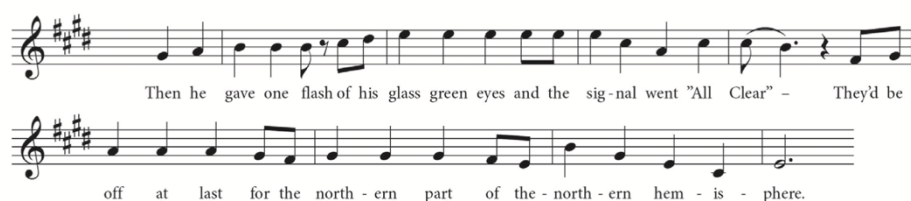
²⁹ Original London Cast: *Hair*. Polydor – 583 043, 1968.

And the signal goes “All Clear!”
 And we’re off at last to the northern part
 Of the Northern Hemisphere!³⁰

This is a traditional Scottish ballad stanza, known as Chevy Chase (iambic tetrameters and trimeters alternating), with several iambs replaced with anapests. This stanza is well known in Hungary (applied in such important poems as *Szózat* [Appeal] by Mihály Vörösmarty or *A walesi bárdok* [The Bards of Wales] by János Arany) but is used in purely iambic form. The Hungarian translator of the printed poem, István Tótfalusi, apparently wanted an anapestic rendition, probably based on the most symmetric of the lines, the third, which contains anapests in each half. Anapestic forms are less widespread in Hungarian and the best-known references (as Sándor Petőfi’s *Szeptember végén* [At the End of September]) use a neutral spondaic foot at the beginning of each line. This spondee is often substituted for one neutral syllable as Auftakt or anacrusis (as in Lajos Áprily’s *Március* [March in Transylvania]),³¹ and the meter is still considered anapestic (due to its provenance) although it turns effectively dactylic. This results in a line scheme that is familiar to the ear of the Hungarian reader, and also suitable for the mimetic background function, imitating the rattling of a train:

Zöld szeme villan, s lendül a tárcsa,
 Jelzi vidáman: “Tiszta az út!”
 S éjszaka mélyén északi tájra
 Éjjeli Gyorsunk fut, tovafut.³²

József Romhányi, the translator of the song, was confronted not with the printed, canonical poem, but with Lloyd Webber’s score. For him, the exact metric formula was indifferent, since the listener would receive the metrical part of the experience through the music, anyway. Romhányi strove neither to reconstruct Eliot’s original metrical intention, nor to evoke a sense of that intention in Hungarian, but to create a corresponding Hungarian text that adhered to the metrical interpretation adopted by the composer:³³



The metrical formula that can be deduced from the score looks like this: U U – – – | U U – – – || U U – – – | U U –. Somewhat paradoxically, the sung text can remain closer to natural diction, since it is already differentiated from everyday language by virtue of being sung. The tightness of versification can be loosened, as the musicality is provided by the music itself. This simplification is also desirable because the sung text must remain intelligible in a single hearing

³⁰ Ricks, Christopher / McCue, Jim (eds.): *T. S. Eliot: The Poems II*. Faber and Faber: London, 2015, p. 29.

³¹ This and the previously mentioned poems can be found in Makkai, Ádám (ed.): *In Quest of the "Miracle Stag": The Poetry of Hungary*. Vol I. Atlantis-Centaur, M. Szivárvány, Corvina: Chicago, Budapest, 1996, pp. 227–228, 278–281, 313–313, 517.

³² Ferencz, Győző (ed.): *T. S. Eliot: Versek, drámák, Macskák könyve*. Európa: Budapest, 1986, p. 413.

³³ This and the next detail are taken from an earlier study of mine on the oeuvre of Romhányi. See Kappanyos, András: "Mit tudott Romhányi József?". In: Csörsz, Rumen István (ed.): *Doromb: Közköltészeti tanulmányok 9*. Reciti: Budapest, 2021, pp. 417–440.

(i.e., without the possibility of immediate revisiting), and in the presence of musical accompaniment. Romhányi's solution sounds like this:

Akkor felvillan már a nagy zöld szem,
minden jelzés szabadra áll.
És mi szép lassan megyünk északra,
hol a Sarkcsillag szalutál.³⁴

Romhányi's text relies on the music: reading it gives musical pleasure only if one knows (and silently sings) the tune to which it is written. Tótfalusi's solution creates its own musicality, which would remain valid even if Andrew Lloyd Webber had never written the music – but which cannot be reconciled to this music. But the question of compatibility can be raised at a more subtle level. The following line of the same poem, “And there's not a speck of dust on the floor,” is translated by Tótfalusi as “Nem látsz padlóján egy porszemet” (“You don't see a speck of dust on the floor”). In terms of versification, it is fully equivalent, but the score reads:



The last syllable falls on a sustained note, and, sung with the Hungarian printed translation, it would coincide, comically, with an unstressed conjugation, essentially a suffix. In Romhányi's version, the same line sounds: “s a padlóra egy porszem se száll” (“and not a speck of dust falls on the floor”). A stressed word is placed in the musically emphatic position. This example clearly shows the different requirements of printed and performed translations. The two versions could not be switched, and neither could have the two translators been able to fulfil one another's task either.

The other successful project is much less intriguing in terms of language and prosody, but much more interesting in terms of cultural adaptation. László Hobo Földes belongs to the first Hungarian beat generation but, as a performer, untypically, only started his professional career in his mid-thirties. In the late 1970s, he formed Hobo Blues Band, which, indeed, played rather authentic blues-rock, a color that had been missing from the palette of Hungarian popular music. Besides original numbers, they played classics from Cream, Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Led Zeppelin, and others. Yet, also untypically, they played them in Hobo's Hungarian translations.³⁵

Földes preferred songs that contained strong narrative or dramatic elements: *Johnny B. Goode*, *Sympathy with the Devil*, *Hey Joe*, or *Mannish Boy* became important numbers in the band's concert repertoire. In a sense, Földes's contribution was more than translation: he also dramatized and actualized the lyrics to fit them into the performance. *Hey Joe* became a real dialogue with the two roles divided between the steady parlando of Földes and the very flexible, virtuoso blues singing of Gyula Bill Deák.³⁶ The narrative of *Mannish Boy* was rewritten, in the spirit of the original, to tell a Hungarian coming-of-age story.³⁷ The translations were not

³⁴ Romhányi's lyrics were published posthumously and privately in 2013 in a volume under the title *Eliot–Romhányi: Macskák*. (Publisher not indicated, quotation: p. 45).

³⁵ These texts are available at <https://hoboarchivum.hu/forditasok>, retrieved 10.9.2022.

³⁶ Released as track A/4 on their first LP: Hobo Blues Band: *Középeurópai Hobo Blues*. Pepita – SLPX 17648, 1980.

³⁷ Released with the title *Tisztelet Muddy Watersnek* (Homage to Muddy Waters) as track A/1 on their second LP: Hobo Blues Band: *Olyan sokáig voltunk lenn*. Pepita – SLPX 17694, 1982.

philologically accurate or very artistic from a poetic point of view; they were meant to function as integrated parts of a performance. And they managed to retain coolness in a roundabout way.

By this time, the contemporaries of Földes, the first generation of Hungarian beat music, had become established professionals, their musical tastes part of the mainstream, and their fans responsible adults. But Földes, as a late arrival, a newcomer, managed to address a teenage audience, the rebels of a new generation half his age. As blues and blues-rock had not been among the preferred genres of the mainstream, he was able to show something new to his audiences. Even though the songs and styles originated from the previous decades, their reception had remained blocked or postponed in Hungary at the time. The actualized presentation of this cultural domain of unquestionable classics became, somewhat unconsciously, an educational project, one that was also cool and attractive, an appropriate reference point for generational identity building. Although in reality it was secondary (derivative), due to the circumstances, it could be perceived as original and primary, showing that the aura of cultural artefacts is not an essential but rather a discursive characteristic.

Epigraphs of Christine: A Subjective Interjection

As we had seen, translation could ruin both the coolness and the authenticity of an otherwise perfectly cool and authentic song. Another argument against it is the fact that it is exceedingly difficult. Some thirty-odd years ago the author of [these-this linesc-hapter](#) was commissioned to translate the epigraphs in Stephen King's *Christine*, a thriller with an unconventional protagonist: a 1958 Plymouth Fury. The prose text was handed to a well-respected translator, while the epigraphs, basically 51 car-related quotations from early rock and roll songs, were given to an untested rookie.³⁸ In some newer English editions, the epigraphs are omitted, and I have also seen a German version where they left the epigraphs in the original English – both moves are quite understandable. To begin with, the lyrics are very contextual, thus very *exclusive*. They belong to a subculture and try to draw the language barriers of that subculture or define an even smaller one inside it (e.g. East-coast car-enthusiast womanizer rock-and-rollers). This brings about a dense and very specific slang vocabulary. In 1988 (pre-internet Hungary), it was not easy to find an American of the proper age group and social status who was able to reveal, for instance, the meaning of the word “whiteskirt.” When I understood that it referred to the white inset on the external side of car tires of the era, I had to decide what to do about it in Hungary, where hardly anyone had ever even encountered the phenomenon itself, let alone given it a linguistic formula. Some of the songs were known in Hungary: with those I had to create some sort of singable prosody to keep them recognizable. Some were unknown: for those, I also had to build some sort of prosody so that they should remain recognizable as songs. Some of them contained doo-wop style nonsense syllables that even rhymed with actual words, but the same syllables either did not rhyme with anything in Hungarian, or they sounded totally ridiculous, or both. To cut it short, I think I put in almost as much work as my respectable prose translator colleague and I still did not quite succeed in translating all the songs in a singable way, so the cultural transfer could not be fully completed.

At the level of cultural appropriation, it is an important obstacle that the experience of early rock and roll is missing from Hungarian cultural history. Hungarian audiences had not encountered either the musical sensation, or the scandals and behavioral excesses of early rock and roll (like Little Richard's piano stomping or Elvis's famous pelvic thrust), as most of these were concurrent with a rigorously closed Stalinist regime in Hungary, where people genuinely believed that Coca-Cola was a mind-altering drug, and where television broadcasts would not be available until 1957, anyway. The political consolidation of the Hungarian regime and the cultural consolidation of the international (but especially British) popular music scene

³⁸ King, Stephen: *Christine*. Trans. Falvay, Mihály; poems trans. Kappanyos, András. Árkádia: Budapest, 1989.

coincided in 1963–65. While the original divisiveness of the new cultural trends was received in Hungary in a rather tamed form, some clashes were unavoidable. To quote a contemporary report, “An insignificant but loud group of young audience members demonstrated their support for the Illés band and antipathy for the other bands by whistling and throwing apple-cores.”³⁹ This happened as early as May 3, 1963 and led to the detention of at least five audience members for 20 to 30 days. Considering that all this happened in a dictatorship that was slowly beginning to consolidate itself after the bloody retribution for a revolution that had erupted from a youth protest (in 1956), one can understand how important it became for Hungarian authorities to defuse the subversive or countercultural potential of beat music and herd it into the safe paddock of traditional *sláger* music.

Under Their Thumb: The Question of Control

As indicated earlier, the beginnings of this cultural transfer process took place at an ideal moment of history. The brutal retaliation for the 1956 revolution had officially concluded in May 1963 with the announcement of a general amnesty for political offenders, and this signaled the beginning of an era of consolidation.⁴⁰ Along with economic concessions, the government tried to win the population over by allowing some access to Western cultural goods: in October of the same year the Hungarian Television began to serialize *The Saint* (with Roger Moore) and *The Huckleberry Hound Show* (by Hannah & Barbera). These measures, along with playing some beat music on the state radio, were clearly meant to restore a feeling of civic normality.

The contemporary trends of Western popular music entered the country through three main channels: Radio Luxembourg, the British-owned commercial station that primarily targeted British teenagers, but due to its medium wave range could be received in Central Europe as well; the Hungarian broadcast of Radio Free Europe, and its program *Teenager Party*, with its stunningly cool title; and the vinyl records sent home by friends and relatives who had left the country in the chaotic weeks of the 1956 revolution and its aftermath. All of these sources were considered politically suspect, but were very much detectable in the veins of the entire cultural transfer. The Eastern domestication of modern Western popular music certainly included an element of whitewashing.

The original Hungarian beat song was the spontaneous invention of the Szörényi–Bródy partnership (the main songwriters of the Illés band) in the summer of 1965. It soon became clear, both to the musicians and the authorities, that the main avenue for the adaptation of Western youth culture and modern popular music in Hungary would be the writing and performance of original Hungarian-language songs. Events were moving in this direction, but the decision had yet to be taken by official cultural policy. This decision was not entirely self-evident: in several states of the Eastern Bloc, this kind of freedom (e.g. the spontaneous formation of bands) was inconceivable. In the spirit of the “happiest barrack,” authorities took the risk of permitting this playing field. On the one hand, this opened a new, broader gate onto the cultural transfer of beat music, while on the other, it placed the whole movement under strict political control.

In addition to cultural political reasons, linguistic factors certainly contributed to the decision in Hungary. The genres of international popular music, from rhythm and blues to hip-hop, are based on the prosodic properties of the English language. The rhythm of English words and phrases, the melody of speech, the distribution of vowels and consonants, the length of words and syllables, and the characteristic stress relations are all crucial, while a particularly important element is the way in which musical phrasing can distort the linguistic phrase without

³⁹ Komornik, Ferenc: “Tánczene, tanulságokkal”. *Magyar Ifjúság*, May 11, 1963, p. 9.

⁴⁰ For a historical perspective of this consolidation process, see Linz, Juan J. / Stepan, Alfred: *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, London, 1996, pp. 293–315.

altering or obliterating its meaning. Italian, for example, because of its higher proportion of vowels and open syllables, gives more scope for syllables to be lengthened without altering the meaning: this is why *bel canto* developed in this language, and why Italian arias translated into English can sometimes make non-English listeners as uncomfortable as rock and roll sung in Italian makes non-Italian listeners. The French *chanson*'s lively expressiveness and wide range of emotional dynamics are made possible by the inherent characteristics of the French language, such as its slightly blurred syllable boundaries, which are less conducive to strong rhythmicity.

The Hungarian language is very adaptable in the prosodic sense. There are three systems of verse in Hungarian poetry: one based on the regular return of word stresses (connected to local folk traditions), one based on syllable length (connected to the tradition of Greek and Latin antiquity), and a third which adapts Western European forms (such as the sonnet) in rhyming iambic form. In Hungarian, therefore, rhythm can be created both on the basis of the stress and the length of syllables, and quantitative meter can even coexist with accentual-syllabic verse, supporting or counterpointing each other. Words retain their meaning well even when stretched or pronounced very quickly: Hungarian rap and slam poetry are proof of this, while the antecedents of the same techniques can also be found in folk songs. In short, the conditions for the adaptation of beat music to sound good in the target language is better fulfilled in Hungary than in the neighboring, largely Slavic-speaking countries. It is interesting to note that in Czechoslovakia and Poland, which were the most comparable to Hungary in terms of cultural policy, instrumental jazz and fusion jazz-rock became more dominant as the progressive, leading genre in the generational sense. In these cases, the question of textual censorship did not occur.

In Hungary, official control over youth culture had three main forms: restrictions concerning appearances and behavior; textual censorship; and the most effective one, soft domestication, that is, the blurring of the boundaries between beat and *sláger* music. The instances of behavioral control are not particularly interesting and mostly fall outside the scope of this paper. These occurrences were similar to their Western counterparts (insistence on performers having a "normal" haircut or wearing a tie) except that the infringements were often framed in a political context, which made them riskier. The authorities insisted on "normality," even in fully apolitical productions that might be deemed overly enthusiastic or passionate: the pursuit of ecstasy through music was itself regarded as irrational, and thus dissenting, unsocialist. If someone tried to flee from reality, it implied that they were dissatisfied with that reality.

As for textual censorship, it is not very easy to pinpoint its actual instances. Artists rarely tried their luck with politically questionable lyrics; they practiced what Péter Esterházy has called self-censorship. The most famous case of interception of a song's publication is probably that of János Bródy's *Ha én rózsá volnék* (If I Were a Rose). It is in fact a set of new lyrics, written around 1969, applied to a traditional folk tune. The verses are political allegories: if I were a window, I would show everything; if I were a door, I would let everyone in; if I were a flag, I wouldn't be the plaything of any wind, and so on – any Hungarian adult could decode them at the time. In 1973, when the song was published on an LP by Zsuzsa Koncz,⁴¹ this much would have been tolerated from such established artists. But one verse evoked the image of a street being crushed by tank treads and collapsing beneath them, and that was going too far. In context, this verse referred to the Prague Spring of 1968, a peaceful democratic movement that was brutally suppressed by the troops of the Warsaw Pact, with the involvement Hungarian tanks rolling over the streets of Prague. But the second association led back to 1956 and Soviet tanks rolling over the streets of Budapest. The song thus violated one of the foremost taboos: reference to the doubtful and violent origin of the Kádár regime. The authorities had the record

⁴¹ Koncz, Zsuzsa: *Jelbeszéd*. Pepita – 17462, 1973.

withdrawn from the shops and shelved. The song nevertheless remained very popular in its half-banned status and became a “campfire” favorite. By the late eighties, it had become a standard element of almost every political demonstration and transformed into a generic and thus rather toothless anthem of political dissent. Overuse turned it into a sort of cliché, somewhat like John Lennon’s *Imagine*. Soft domestication proves more effective in taking the edge off a song than direct restriction.

Roll Over Zhdanov: A Triumph of Irony

The need to tame and domesticate a countercultural trend – especially when it outgrows its original social framework – is a natural reaction. But while in Western countries this process was mostly directed by the forces of commercialization, in the East it was motivated rather by politics. Western counterculture was regarded by Eastern authorities as the product of a decomposing capitalist society in crisis. As a symptom of a failed world order, it was handled somewhat like avant-garde art had been handled in the doctrines of Stalin’s cultural commissar, Andrei Zhdanov.⁴² In the most authoritarian period, the avant-garde was banned and persecuted; in more enlightened times it was allowed but restricted to an ornamental role. Something similar happened to beat music: the Hungarian authorities (at least the more enlightened among them) saw it as a relatively harmless trend, something that could be used as an apolitical way to release political tensions. As young people would inevitably want to sing and dance in their own separate way, authorities thought they were better off feeding them a controlled cultural diet rather than letting them roam uncharted, dangerous territories. Beat music was played on the radio (carefully interspersed with *sláger* music), magazines wrote harmless articles about the more harmless groups, concerts were allowed, and songs were recorded. The cultural appropriation of beat music received a green light, on the condition that it would not aspire to do anything beyond entertaining young people in a “normal” way.

This project of cultural transfer became, in effect, a premeditated mistranslation. While the beat (and later pop-rock) scene in Hungary undoubtedly produced some songs that have retained their appeal and meaning across decades and generations, the peculiar climate of state socialist cultural policy effectively prevented it from acting as a genuine generational counterculture, from giving an authentic voice to young people’s feelings about life, their anxieties, their attempts to break out, their alternative values. Beat (and pop-rock) was largely confined to the traditional entertainment music genre, domesticated and corrupted in the guise of institutionalization. Happy, upbeat, radio-friendly pop music (in effect, modernized *sláger* music) was encouraged (recorded, published, toured, promoted), while darker, heavier, or more intellectual experiments were not. This destroyed several very promising musical careers, especially in the early seventies (Syrius, Kex, Taurus). Musical censorship worked mostly at the generic level: the clearest instance of this was the so-called Táncdalfesztivál (Dance Music Festival, occurring in 1966, 1967, and 1968), a televised talent show where beat musicians had to compete with *sláger* musicians for a chance to become part of the entertainment industry.⁴³

We have seen the examples of the cultural untranslatability of individual beat songs, while these instances embody the difficulties of the adaptation of the cultural phenomenon as such. Hungarian beat could not become a genuine counterculture because it did not have the opportunity to challenge, even symbolically, the important factors of the local status quo; it

⁴² “The decline and decay of bourgeois literature derive from the decline and decay of the capitalist system and are a feature and aspect characteristic of the present condition of bourgeois culture and literature.” From Zhdanov’s speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934. Riha, Thomas (ed.): *Readings in Russian Civilization Volume III: Soviet Russia, 1917–1963*. The University of Chicago Press: London, 1969, p. 694.

⁴³ On this subject, see my earlier study, Kappanyos, András: “Az ellenkultúra domesztikálása: Táncdalfesztivál 1966–1968”. In: Ignácz, Ádám (ed.): *Populáris zene és államhatalom: Tizenöt tanulmány*. Rózsavölgyi és Társa: Budapest, 2017, pp. 64–81.

could not fully attain its own authenticity. The largely apolitical but monopolized entertainment industry, fully calibrated to *sláger* music, played a larger role in this than actual censorship. Apart from a few exceptions,⁴⁴ violent restrictions were not necessary. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a secondary public sphere arose, non-compliant groups were simply left to their own resources and the authorities were confident that, without the help of the monopolized industry, none of them would be able to survive long enough or grow large enough to become politically dangerous. Beat music's internal set of rules and forms demanded that personal and societal discomfort should be expressed in terms of sadness and anger, and as far as it remained so, state-socialist politics could keep it at bay with their tested methods of oppression. Things began to change gradually in the early 1980s, when satire, quirkiness, and the grotesque became incorporated into popular music, partly due to the influences of some exotic styles (ska, reggae, etc.), which in turn had a particularly liberating effect in Hungary. In the last decade of state-socialism, an important segment of the beat movement managed to fulfil its vocation: if not in the representation of angry teens, in that of sophisticated, dissenting intellectuals, it functioned as it was meant to: as counterculture, partly correcting the translation error that had been Hungarian beat. But this belongs to another study.

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⁴⁴ In 1983, the members of a marginal punk group, CPg, were sentenced to 18 to 24 months for their violently anti-Soviet and anti-establishment lyrics.

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