

“Outsider”: The Influence of Migration Experience on the Life and Work of Hungarian-Canadian Songwriter B.B. Gábor

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the life and work of Gábor Hegedűs, whose family escaped from the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, and settled in Toronto, Canada. Under the stage name B.B. Gábor, he wrote and released several successful songs and albums, many of which drew on his experience as a refugee, and were broadcast around the world, as well as in Canada. His most popular songs were satiric commentaries on culture and politics, comparing life in the USSR and in Canada. These were the themes that drew the most attention from audiences and critics, and earned them international airplay, most notably on Radio Free Europe. His difficulties coping with life as a refugee and as an immigrant to Canada resulted in personal tragedy, yet his ability to express these difficulties in his songs left a lasting legacy in both Canada and his native Hungary. (VK; KK; NBN)

KEYWORDS: music, politics, satire, Cold War, heterotopia

“After all the horrors spawned by ideological rigidity in our century, the notion of a variety of histories, as opposed to a single history, is to be celebrated.”

Modris Eksteins

Gábor Hegedűs (1948–1990) was a musician whose history defined his art. He and his family emigrated to Great Britain, and then to Canada, to escape the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Settling in Toronto in 1972, he launched his music career playing at Queen Street music clubs and became known by the stage name B.B. Gábor. In 1980 and 1981 he released two albums that received popular and critical acclaim; a third, recorded in 1985, remains unreleased to date. Many of his song lyrics contain social and political satire based on his early experiences, and two in particular, “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery)” (Gabor and Armstrong 1980) and “Moscow Drug Club” (Gabor, Stevenson, and Keldie 1980), were released in Canada, the UK, Europe, and Australia (although not in the US) and received widespread airplay in Canada and on Radio Free Europe (Linden 1980).

Hegedűs himself was ambivalent about the popular and critical acclaim accorded to his satires on the Soviet Union, often stating to interviewers that he did not want to be stereotyped for what he considered to be merely jokes. In an interview with Evelyn Erskine of the *Ottawa Journal*, he said that “he does not intend to make a career on an anti-Soviet platform: ‘I’m not a gimmick merchant’” (Erskine 1980, 35); Erskine points out that several of his other songs, such as “Consumer” (1980) and “Metropolitan Life” (1980), satirize Western society as well. In interviews, he claimed to be apolitical, but accepted that his life history and migration experience had an inescapable influence on his music. He often said that he felt like an “outsider,” and he transformed this feeling of displacement into a perspective from which he was able to criticize both East and West. He enjoyed a brief period of fame in the early 1980s, when his witty and intelligent style was fashionable on the Canadian New Wave scene, and although his uncompromising attitude toward his art soon alienated his commercially-oriented recording company, Anthem Records, who dropped him from their roster after his second album, he had a lasting influence on, and maintains continued respect among, the Canadian artistic community. Sadly, he succumbed to what his friends and colleagues described as life-

long depression and took his own life on January 17, 1990.

B.B. Gábor's European roots and migrant trajectory were vital to his musical vision; his personal experience as a refugee from a war zone gave him a deep understanding of the fragility of modern society and civilization, and an insight into the illusory nature of the "peace, order, and good government" that his adopted nation, Canada, claims in its constitution (Constitution Act, 1867); he communicated these insights clearly in his songs. We will examine the historical, political, and geographical contexts that shaped his life and art before analyzing his national and global reception by music reviewers and audiences, with reference to the concept of "heterotopia," a term used to describe the sense of loss and isolation often felt by immigrants and refugees (Mead 1995/6; Drewniak 2104; Szamosi 2019). We will also draw upon Will Straw's concepts of cultural fluidity, the blending of domestic and foreign influences in the construction of Canadian culture, the inherent time lag in such a construction, and the effect of commodity consumerism on Gábor's work and career (Straw 2005, 2008). We will explore themes in Gábor's songs and lyrics and show how he develops them using verbal and musical imagery, symbols, and metaphors. His choice of words and images, drawing upon his life, heritage, and cultural experiences, was unique for a popular songwriter in Canada in the 1980s, and it was this distinctive voice that contributed to his Canadian and international success.

Like many immigrants to Canada, Gábor struggled to find his identity. In an article entitled "Soviet Misfit: The Life and Music of B.B. Gabor,"¹ Imran Khan provides a detailed chronology of his life, along with useful biographical information gleaned from an interview with his brother, Istvan:

Clearly, there was much weighing on the young Gabor's life. His debut reads like a wide-eyed immigrant surveying his new surroundings with wonder, fright, and the emerging desire to connect with everything around him. It also reads like the collective

musings of a typical Torontonion, resigned to the routines of his home city. It's this contradiction of emotional proclivities which seems to have defined much of Toronto living among migrants during the early '80s. (2016)

This duality of vision is an integral part of Canadian identity, and it forms one of the major themes of Canadian literature and the culture it describes. From its beginnings as a nation, Canada has been a country of immigrants, with large communities hailing from Britain, Europe, and Asia. Toronto is a cosmopolitan city with many immigrant communities. Canada today officially welcomes immigration, but inevitably there are difficulties adjusting to new surroundings and a new culture (Papp 1980; Venkovits 2020). Khan addresses this process of adjustment, which forms a major current in Canadian literature and culture, in his discussion of Gábor's songs: "The lyrics are especially telling; Gabor demonstrates the absurdity of irrational fear in a satirical comment on xenophobia; implicitly, migrants contending with displaced identities and projected fears" (2016).

Displacement, often described by critics and theorists in terms of "heterotopia," is a major theme in Canadian literature and academic writing. Gertrud Szamosi uses the concept in Foucault's sense—heterotopia "describe[ing] places and spaces of otherness that are neither here nor there and that are simultaneously physical and mental" (89)—to illustrate the experience of immigrants who feel caught between past and present, the old country and the new. This feeling is experienced by refugees in search of safety and security, who find it in a safe place like Canada, but who then feel loss, alienation, and isolation—all of which can define one's identity (Drewniak 2014, 24–26). These concepts are often used to understand novels and stories written by immigrants to Canada, as well as poetry and songs, including those by B.B. Gábor, whose lyrics contain themes of loneliness, alienation, and discomfort illustrated with the experience of marginalized people in both the Soviet Union and Canada. The concept of

heterotopia helps to provide an understanding of his recurring theme of being an “outsider.”

In interviews, Gábor acknowledged the influence of his early life on the themes of his songs: “In a 1980 interview with Paul McGrath of the *Globe and Mail*, B.B. Gabor recalled that his family escaped Hungary just ‘one step ahead of the Russian tanks’” (McGinnis 2018). In a *Music Express* interview, he explained how he came to Canada:

The revolution started on October 23, 1956 and there were two weeks of really amazing freedom. Everyone in Budapest thought that finally, the whole yoke had been shaken off, that we had liberated ourselves from the Soviet line of communism—that we had done what Tito had successfully done in 1948. It seemed like that to the Russians too, which is why they sat back for two weeks and allowed the state of freedom. Public opinion was also in favour of the revolt.

Then at the end of those two weeks, the Russians realized the West wasn’t going to step in and risk a war over Hungary. So in they came, and it was two weeks after they came that we decided to leave. (Linden 1980)

Gábor and his family were among the more than 37,000 Hungarians who found asylum in Canada after the 1956 Russian invasion, the largest intake of refugees in Canadian history. As Tamsyn Burgman reported in *The Toronto Star*,

More than 200,000 Hungarians fled their homes in the Iron Curtain country in 1956 and 1957, after a two-week uprising that began in Budapest on Oct. 23 with university students rallying for basic human rights—and, mainly, to get the Soviets out. Hundreds of Hungarians were executed, 2,500 died fighting, and 20,000 were injured. (2007)

A 2007 Hungarian-language magazine article provides more information about Gábor's early life, his route to Canada, and his aspirations, and provides another insight into why he moved to Canada:

Gábor Hegedűs was an unhappy guy. In 1956, at the age of eight, he emigrated with his parents to London, where he later became a taxi driver. He didn't dream of a music career, though music was really important to him, especially the black dance music that he learned from Motown Records in Detroit. When he left London, he thought he was going there, but the cheapest charter flight was to Toronto, so there was no argument against that. Canada was a boring place, as always, but the wind of the new wave blew over it, so Gábor became established there. From a combination of B.B. King and Zsa Zsa Gabor, he created a new name for himself, added a guitar, and it only took a few backing musicians to be an international star for fifteen minutes. (Marton)²

These early experiences provided the inspiration for his two biggest hits, "Moscow Drug Club" and "Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery)," which found an audience in his native Hungary as well as in Canada.³ In 2014, Péter Kocsis wrote, "Played here more than once, B.B. Gábor's hit, 'Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery),' is a song which still holds its place today. The musician himself would have deserved a mention . . . even in the years immediately before the change of regime" (Trans. Naterer). Musicologist Tamás Szőnyei mentions B.B. Gábor in his 1992 book *Az Új Hullám Évtizede 2* [The Decade of New Wave Music 2] (341), and Gábor also has an entry in the *Az égben lebegők csarnoka/A magyar zenei élet elhunyt csillagainak emlékdala* [Memorial Page of the Deceased Stars of Hungarian Music Life] Facebook site.⁴ During the 1980s, Canadian fans were aware of this international airplay, and it formed part of the appeal of his music:

Istvan Hegedus says of his brother, Gabor, ‘his music was broadcast to Hungary via Radio Free Europe, as some of his songs, like “Soviet Jewellery” and “Moscow Drug Club” had definite Cold War dimensions. Apparently he had a following in Hungary, as well as here in Canada. (McGinnis 2018)

Much of the appeal of Gábor’s songs was its satire. Many Canadian listeners had similar life stories to Gábor’s and identified with the themes in his lyrics, while others who grew up in Canada during the Cold War could remember bomb shelters in the basement, nuclear attack drills in school, and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), so his critique of Russia struck a resonant chord in a wide audience.

For European listeners, there was the added appeal of the forbidden fruit. The situation of international music performance, broadcasting, and marketing, and the influence of Western music and musicians on Eastern European and Russian musicians and audiences during the Cold War (1947–1991) has been well documented. Radio Free Europe began broadcasting into Eastern Europe in 1950 (Puddington 2000, 1). For most of the second half of the twentieth century, officials across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union regarded Western music as ideologically suspect. Martin Lücke points out that from its introduction in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, through the Stalinist era, the government alternated between encouraging and banning jazz (2007, 1). Radio playlists and concert performances were carefully monitored; music considered subversive could be banned, and performers could be imprisoned (Von Faust 2014).

In Hungary, the authorities blocked and censored Western music, but musicians and audiences found ways to listen to it, which was sometimes a risky endeavor: “In Hungary of the 1950s, jazz music was a dangerous pastime—but music lovers got some clandestine help

from the United States government” (Gorondi 2016). Jazz was broadcast on Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, the BBC World Service, Radio Luxembourg, and other stations available in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Genres such as blues, rock, and punk received similar treatment in the following decades. Musicians who fell afoul of the authorities could find themselves in trouble, far more so than their Western counterparts (Kürti 1991). For example, in 1973, the band Illés (Hungarian name: *Illés együttes*, that is, *Illés Ensemble*) broke up after having been barred for one year (plus a fine) from the capital because of an interview they released while staying in Britain in which they criticized the Hungarian government. In the early 1970s, Illés had also been banned from recording. In an even more extreme case, all four members of the band CPg were sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for political incitement in 1983 (Hegedűs 2019).

Gábor’s satire targeted not just Russia and Eastern Europe, but Western culture as well. *BB Gabor* (1980) and *Girls of the Future* (1981) contain songs including “Metropolitan Life,” “Consumer,” “Hunger, Poverty and Misery,” and “Girls of the Future” that take a satirical, anti-consumerist stance criticizing Western capitalism. The anti-Soviet “Moscow Drug Club” and “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery),” and on a more personal note, “Outsider,” a dark ode to the undercurrent of paranoia, were engendered by both these political systems. His witty, edgy lyrics fit in well with the burgeoning Toronto New Wave music scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which featured many songwriters and bands, such as Rough Trade and Pukka Orchestra, who had a similar satirical style and message (Kennedy 2020).

New Wave was a popular genre in Canada and around the world in the early 1980s; R.E.M., from Athens, Georgia, formed in 1980, and their first single, “Radio Free Europe” (Berry, Buck, Stills, and Stipe), dealt with the same themes as “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery)” and “Moscow Drug Club.” Similarly, Nena’s 1983 hit “99 Luftballons” (Fahrenkrog-Petersen and Karges) is a well-known satire on East German politics. All of these

works reflect a widespread popular movement of criticism and rebellion that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Gábor often acknowledged that his experiences as a refugee shaped his life and art, and provided themes, images, and symbols for his song lyrics, musical arrangements, and stage persona. In the interview with Erskine, he said, “The form that it is presented in is a little humorous, but you look at the lyrics and you look at what I’m trying to say in those songs and you’ll know that this message hits hard at the Soviets” (1980, 35). His satire on the KGB, the Soviet secret police, in “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery),” and his critique of Soviet oppression in “Moscow Drug Club” attracted the most critical and popular attention of all his songs.

“Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery)” is a straightforward lyric built around a straightforward metaphor, SOVIET JEWELLERY = HANDCUFFS, and repetition of the word “nyet” (meaning “no” in Russian):

Nyet nyet Soviet, Soviet jewellery

I say no no no no no no no no no—they shouted “Yes!”

And snapped the Soviet jewellery around my wrists

I want to go go go go go go go go go—but they say “Stay!”

The KGB is coming to put me away

I’m just a little dec-a-dec-a-dec-a-dent

I smoke my tea in the bed

They call me a dissident

When you’re better dead than red

For listeners used to simple, polarized “us vs. them” Cold War rhetoric, this lyric confirms

Western stereotypes, but on closer examination, the song contains interesting layers of irony. “Smoking tea in the bed” equates suspicion of being decadent with proof of being a dissident in KGB logic. The ambiguous nature of the word “tea” reflects the arbitrary nature of state oppression. If “tea” is taken literally, then the speaker is being persecuted just for being different; if it is interpreted as slang for cannabis, then possessing it is a crime under the 1934 Criminal Code of the Soviet Union (Conroy 1990; Kramer 1990). There is little information available about drug use in the Soviet Union from the 1920s until 1990 because information about drug use other than alcohol was officially suppressed (Conroy 1990). Possession of cannabis was a crime in Canada in the 1980s, but the usual punishment was a fine and/or short term of imprisonment; Gábor’s lyric implies a more serious outcome in the USSR. The clear message of the song is that being a dissident in any way, performing decadent acts such as smoking marijuana, would be punished harshly by arrest and worse at the hands of the KGB. “Better dead than red” was a slogan current during the 1950s, along with its inverse, “better red than dead” (Doyle et al, 2012). As used in “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery),” it implies that in a police state, where something that would be judged a minor infraction elsewhere is interpreted as proof of committing a crime against the state, life is not worth living.

There is a similar use of idioms with more nuanced imagery and symbolism to satirize state repression in “Moscow Drug Club”:

Underneath the grey streets, where the grey people walk

There’s a small secret nightclub, where subversives sit and talk

Listening to illegal jazz, 10 years behind the Western fads

Smoking Georgian Gold, they refuse to do what they are told—“Nyet!”

Moscow Drug Club, secret rendezvous

Moscow Drug Club, where the Reds play the blues

The musical accompaniment parodies Russian folk music, with instrumentation comprised of accordion, balalaika, string bass, piano, acoustic guitar, vocal harmonies, and verbal interjections (“Nyet!”; “da svidanje”) creating the impression of being in a noisy club; the overall effect has been described as “Brechtian” (Harrison 1981). The lyrics use multiple plays on words to satirize Soviet society and government: in the opening line, Russians are described as “grey people,” symbolizing both their nondescript dress and the tedium of everyday life. Inside the club, however, where the patrons add color to their lives by taking drugs, the “Reds” (a metonym for “Communists”) “play the blues.” The “blues,” like jazz, a musical genre imported from the West, was associated in the minds of Soviet officials with decadence and dissidence; the other meaning of “blues” is, of course, sadness.

You don't hear balalaikas, because they're playing saxophones
They ignore the party line, and disconnect the telephone
They do the shimmy and the shake
They take little “red” pills to stay awake
Under the Kremlin's gaze
Being a beatnik Russkie's risky now-a-days
Moscow Drug Club, secret rendezvous
Moscow Drug Club, where the Reds play the blues
Moscow Drug Club, the 5-Year Plan is just a joke
Moscow Drug Club, Comrade, come on iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnn, and have a toke.

The little “red” pills are another metaphor, combining the tenor of communism with the vehicle of drugs, putting a new interpretation on the Marxist axiom “opiate for the masses”: in these

times, drugs, not religion, are the escape of choice for common people. The original quote from Marx was interpreted as “religion is an opiate for the masses” (Meyer 1970), but Gábor’s pun, in an ironic reversal, replaces “religion” with “drugs.” “Georgian Gold” is a play on “Acapulco Gold,” a potent strain of marijuana popular in the United States in the 1960s, often mentioned in popular films and songs, such as Led Zeppelin’s 1973 song “Over the Hills and Far Away” (McClure 2021). Gábor’s pun here replaces Acapulco, a city in Mexico and source of much of the marijuana used in North America, with Georgia, one of the republics of the USSR, and, according to the CIA, one of the country’s major sources of drugs (CIA.gov).

Another example of transborder intertextuality appears in an allusion to a well-known popular song in the line “you don’t hear balalaikas because they’re playing saxophones / They ignore the party line, and disconnect the telephone”; this is a pun on the old-fashioned use of shared telephone lines, or “party lines,” and prevailing political dogma, and an echo of The Beatles’ “Back in the U.S.S.R.,” in which Paul McCartney sings, “Honey, disconnect the phone,” and “let me hear your balalaikas ringing out” (McCartney 1968). Gábor’s allusion draws on a vein of parody with a long history in rock music: “Back in the U.S.S.R.” is a satire on Chuck Berry’s “Back in the USA” (Berry 1959) and the Beach Boys’ “California Girls” (Wilson 1965); The Beatles’ lyrics subvert Berry’s patriotic sentiments about the United States, and their list of Ukrainian, Moscow, and Georgian girls is a send-up of The Beach Boys’ ode to American girls.

The “party line” line is another multifaceted jab at Soviet officials’ hypocrisy. Undoubtedly, Soviet telephony was developed primarily to create total domination in the Soviet regions. Though telephony in the USSR became much more casual in the 1970s, it still retained a surveillance character:

Direct telephone lines between the capital of the USSR and major Ukrainian cities

offered a means of control that bypassed the republic level authorities. This control imperative, coupled with the goal of political education in the annexed territories, ensured that the western regions received “privileged treatment” in the provision of technology and equipment. . . . Telecommunications technologies were expected to establish Soviet political authority in these areas, while preserving their image as “prosperous regions” in the eyes of their residents. (Roth-Ey and Zakharova 2015)

Gábor’s lyrics counter the premise of the official plan—how could anyone achieve surveillance/prosperity if the party line is constantly ignored? “Moscow Drug Club” is thus a multi-layered parody.

The line “Listening to illegal jazz, ten years behind the Western fads” introduces two themes; the first, that Western music, including jazz, was at times outlawed behind the Iron Curtain. This, however, according to contemporary accounts, did not prevent audiences from listening to it, but turned it into a “forbidden fruit,” with jazz recordings smuggled into the country and broadcast from Western radio stations (Troitsky 1988). Jazz was not the only genre made attractive by the ban. Rock music by artists including Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Hank Marvin and the Shadows, and many others was broadcast via western stations throughout Europe, even though authorities went to great lengths to intercept such illicit cargo by jamming broadcasts, intercepting mail, and circulating lists of banned musicians and songs (Von Faust 2014). The ekphrastic color and sound symbolism in the lyrics creates a vivid mental picture that, with the ironic juxtaposition of the satiric text and anachronistic accompaniment, develops a tragicomic theme: unlike Ian Dury’s “sex and drugs and rock and roll / are very good indeed” (1977), mixing politics, drugs, and music in the Soviet Union was not very good at all.

With respect to the line, “ten years behind the Western fads,” Will Straw proposes a theory about time delay:

In popular and critical understandings of music, distance from a center is presumed to institute a delay of influence, a “lateness,” as when Soviet jazz or Bollywood thriller movie funk are mocked (or, these days, relished) for their tardy absorption of innovations from elsewhere. (“Ten years behind the Western styles,” Hungarian Canadian new-waver B. B. Gabor sang, mockingly, of Soviet jazz, in his 1980 song “Moscow Drug Club”) . . . The implicit model here is of a broken communications system through which news of stylistic change arrives at the margins too late and too faintly to be understood and credibly acted upon. (Straw 2008, 121–22)

The time delay is reinforced by the line, “They do the shimmy and the shake,” specific references to outmoded Western styles: the shimmy and the shake are dances dating from 1919 and 1965 respectively (Piron).

The assumption of a time delay resulting from censorship and repression is the subject of debate, however: Lücke puts the delay at five years, starting in the early 1920s (2007, 1). Radio Free Europe began broadcasting into the Eastern Bloc in 1950 (Puddington 2000), and jazz musicians there were well aware of the latest recordings: “[Hungarian] Drummer Ferenc Ruttka, later a famous painter and art director in Xlms, recalled that jazz was a ‘forbidden fruit’ in the 1950s but said many musicians managed to stay abreast of the rapidly changing scene by getting their hands on smuggled recordings” (Gorondi 2016). Radio Free Europe playlists from 1980–82, the same time that Gábor’s “Nyet Nyet Soviet (Soviet Jewellery)” and “Moscow Drug Club” were released, show that audiences in Hungary, the USSR, and other Eastern Bloc countries were fully up to date with Western music releases. The idea that listeners behind the “Iron Curtain” were behind the times is one of the Western stereotypes about the East that Gábor satirizes in his songs; the stereotype lingered because it allowed a sort of constructed cultural

nostalgia, and because memories of the old country tend to be fixed in the minds of émigrés at the time they left.

In contrast to his Russian songs, several of Gábor's songs, such as "Metropolitan Life" (Gabor, Stevenson), satirize Western society:

Give me half a minute and I'll tell you what I'm thinking

I get so excited when you're waving that knife

It's driving me crazy but I know I can't blame you

For the deserving man this metropolitan life

Everybody seems to be in some kind of fever

Cruising up and down the same old step and getting high

Left wing politicians, loose women and musicians

Try to make a living off a regular guy

Metro metropolitan life

You can survive, but it all depends

You're on a street that never ends

The song's title and refrain are a play on the name of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (one of the world's largest corporations) and the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto (where Gábor settled). Life in Canada, in Gábor's telling, is no bed of roses either. Urban decay is portrayed in verbal images such as "you're waving that knife," "getting high," and "sweeping up the sidewalk after every fight," which result in feelings of fear, hopelessness, and cognitive dissonance that drive the speaker "crazy," since the gap between expectations and reality "don't make no sense." The fear was not imaginary; a Statistics Canada report on homicides in Canada between 1980 and 1989 showed a 23 percent rise in knife crime. The lines "Left wing

politicians, loose women, and musicians / Try to make a living off a regular guy” provide an ironic juxtaposition, as Gábor includes himself in the group about which the speaker, “a regular guy,” is complaining.

The second verse ironically compares the life of the “regular guy” in the urban first world to that of people living in third world deserts; the “concrete” desert of the city gets people “down on their knees.”

Third world people well they got their situation
Living in the desert where there ain't no trees
Well look around downtown, everywhere there's concrete
And people getting down on their knees
Well I don't wanna talk about it cause it don't make no sense
I'm living in the city and crying in the night
Television, saturation, sanitation for the nation
Sweeping up the sidewalk after every fight

The line “You can survive, but it all depends” is open ended; it depends on what? The answer is that despite the trappings of civilization, “Television, saturation, sanitation,” life in a modern capitalist city can be dangerous, brutal, and for some, nearly hopeless. Gábor’s ironic commentary on Canadian society exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of western capitalist culture: while wealthy, privileged members of society live comfortable lives, those at the lower end of the social hierarchy might as well be living in third-world countries.⁵

Two of Gábor’s songs that appear diametrically opposed, based on their titles, but which actually share a core theme are “Consumer” (Gabor, Stevenson) and “Hunger, Poverty and Misery” (Gabor). “Consumer” criticizes capitalism and the way advertising and sex are used to

compel people to keep spending at ever-increasing rates:

Discount prices people scrambling shoppers mall is mesmerized
Pretty salesgirls very charming their eyes are there to hypnotize
Double up your daily intake price wars on the costs are rising
The more you eat the more you want just look at the advertising
It's ten to nine you'd better get in line consumer
It's ten to nine you'd better be on time consumer
TV ads and high-priced fads the merchandise is so seductive
The media controls the masses making sure that you're productive

“Mesmerize,” “hypnotize,” and “seductive” recall the use of psychological manipulation in techniques described at length in Vance Packard’s 1957 exposé of the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*. The repetition in the lines “It’s ten to nine you’d better get in line consumer / It’s ten to nine you’d better be on time consumer” emphasizes the pressure felt by inhabitants of this world to work hard in order to be able to afford to buy the unneeded products that keep the wheels of industry greased and the economy growing. The terms “media,” “masses,” “productive,” “daily intake,” and “price wars,” all sound as if they were taken from a sociology or economics textbook, indicating a self-reflexive Marxist criticism from the point of view of someone who can see behind the veil hiding the manipulation of consumer capitalism.

The lyrics to “Hunger, Poverty and Misery” are straightforward, full of literal description and few symbols or metaphors, other than the dead metaphor “razor’s edge,” but the message is the same:

All you comfortable people

Have all you want to eat
I know that some of you would like to
Live a little closer to the street
But I guess that you've decided
That the razor's edge is not for you
I don't think I have to be reminded
What life without money can do

There are things in life other than money
Hunger poverty misery

The song contains many concrete images that evoke the disparity between rich and poor in Canadian society: while the audience is addressed as “comfortable,” implying that they are middle class, if not wealthy, “closer to the street” suggests a more bohemian, adventurous lifestyle; the theme of this song is similar to that of “Metropolitan Life”: while life in Canada is safe and easy for the haves, it is dangerous and difficult for the have-nots. The chorus contains a surprising twist, as the line “There are things in life other than money,” which sounds like a standard maxim, setting up the expectation of a conventional list of items such as “love” or “happiness,” is followed by the ironic asyndeton “Hunger poverty misery.” Gábor here undercuts the uncritical assumption of Western citizens that they are safe in a prosperous society with the voice of experience from one who experienced the destruction of a democratic society in the 1956 Russian invasion of Hungary.⁶

Taken together, these three songs paint a bleak picture of modern urban life in Canada, where citizens are pressured to consume more than they need, but are still always aware that hunger, poverty, and misery await those who fail to conform and perform according to society's

demands. Gábor's gritty, realistic criticisms of the West contrast with his stylized, stereotypical pictures of life behind the Iron Curtain, although there is, we argue, a great deal of truth to the latter. There is an immediacy to his descriptions of life in Canada that contrasts with the more ambiguous imagery of his Russian songs.

Several of Gábor's songs provide a more personal insight into his life and his psyche. On a psychological level, the song "Outsider," from his second and last album, *Girls of the Future*, is a nightmarish vision of paranoia that could apply anywhere, East or West, and any time, in the Cold War of the past or a dystopian future:

It's become a dark night

Come a dark night

It's become a dark night

The air is blue

There's nowhere to hide

The moon is looking at you

There's a light on the water

A steel blue gleam

He's walking behind you

But you don't see him

He has no motive

You have no chance

High explosive

Circumstance

There's an odd man out

There's an odd man outside

He's an odd man inside

He's an outsider

He has no feelings

You have no fear

There is no sound

As he comes here

They'll be looking in the morning

For a tell-tale trace

They know his work

But they never see his face

The narrator is addressing the target of a psychopathic killer who has “no motive”; the setting is night, beside a river, and the victim has “no chance,” because the stalker has killed before: “They know his work / But they never see his face”; “they,” it is implied, are the police. The imagery supports the theme, with the repetition of “dark,” “night,” “the moon,” and light reflected in a “gleam” off the water. Repetition of the word “odd” in the chorus, in the phrases “odd man out,” “odd man outside,” “odd man inside,” and finally, “outsider,” emphasize the various connotations of “oddness”: different, strange, alienated, rejected, and psychologically broken. The “outsider” can be interpreted as a foreigner, someone feeling the effect of the “heterotopia” described earlier, or someone who is psychologically estranged from society, a “loner” who feels no connection to others. The song is neither satire nor political or social commentary, but a glimpse into a tortured, paranoid worldview, conveying a feeling of overwhelming anxiety. A comment by Gábor in an interview in *The Province* provides insight

into the song's origin: "There's a part of me that's from Budapest, a part from London and a part from Toronto. I don't know if that's good. Sometimes I wish I was more a part of one community. I'm the kind of person who is a permanent outsider" (Harrison 1985). The song's narrator is distanced from the drama unfolding between the addressee and his killer, but interviews reveal that Gábor identifies with both; he himself acknowledged that he had emotional and psychological problems: "I would like to think that I'm the nicest and most easy-going guy in the world, but I know I really can't look into a mirror and say that" (Hayes 1980). These problems affected his professional activities, as a member of his band recalls:

B.B. was emotionally unpredictable. He behaved like a bipolar person but I don't know if he was ever diagnosed as such. He would go from overconfident and gregarious to completely withdrawn and unable to perform. Sometimes in the same show. Genius often comes at a high price. One instance stands out. During a set B.B. was quickly becoming less confident and began withdrawing. Halfway through the last set he stopped playing and crawled under the keyboards and went into fetal position. The keyboard player at the time was Dave Stone, now in Vancouver. Dave crawled under the keyboards with him and held him for at least 20 minutes while the crowd just watched. I don't think we finished the night. (Griffiths, Tom. Personal Communication, April 26, 2021)

Another of Gábor's bandmates tells a similar story of the effect of his troubled personal life on his art and life philosophy:

Gabor [was] a very intelligent and interesting man. Very present and intuitive, a good communicator and often edgy. Something was troubling him deep down inside, yet his

song messages were insightful and wanted the world to wake up from our painful dream and habitual frenzy. He pointed to the manipulation of the masses and wanted us to resist. There was an underlying compassion for our plight as programmed consumers, caught in a trap of projected expectations that were never to be fulfilled in the ways made available by the mainstream bourgeois lifestyle we are cultured into. (Justice n.d.)

“Outsider,” his own words in interviews, and the accounts of his bandmates, offer a glimpse into Gábor’s mind that adds to our understanding of the themes of his other songs. Some writers create personas through which they can explore issues and themes without acting out those ideas; David Byrne and Mick Jagger were not psycho killers, even though they sang about them (Byrne, Frantz, and Weymouth, “Psycho Killer” 1977; Jagger and Richards, “Midnight Rambler” 1969).⁷ Writers also create art from personal experience, and “Outsider,” along with Gábor’s statements regarding his feelings of alienation as an immigrant to Canada, professional rejection by his record company, being misunderstood by audiences, and the subject of negative criticism in the Canadian music press, indicates a tangible autobiographical element in his lyrics, in conjunction with his critique of society, and foreshadow his descent into depression and eventual death by suicide.

From the same album, *Girls of the Future*, the title song is another social satire, with another personal statement at the end:

Girls of the future will be from the east
They’ll be imported, trained to be obedient
Girls of the future will be wrapped in cellophane
Sealed at the factory far in the Orient

...

Girls of the future will be programmed to serve

Girls of the future printed circuit well

I'm a little bit scared by the girls of the future

Like David Bowie's "China Girl" (1977; 1983) and Pukka Orchestra's "Rubber Girl" (Williamson 1981), "Girls of the Future" satirizes the commodification of women. Unlike Bowie's real girl, and Williamson's plastic inflatable sex doll, Gábor's is a *Stepford Wives*-style robot (Levin 1972). In this science fiction-inspired lyric, Gábor envisioned with trepidation the inevitable future of a capitalist society that values profits over people and commodifies basic human needs and human bodies with a description of life-sized, mass-produced plastic sex dolls that was quite prophetic.

In an article about the social and political effect of current popular music, Alexander Herbert notes that "Pussy Riot has mobilized some Russians to inject their music with a dose of political consciousness that turns the abstract neo-Nazi and bureaucratic state into concrete realities, not distant boogiemen" (Herbert 2019, 227). B.B. Gábor did the same for Canadian music in the 1980s with song lyrics written with a political consciousness that shone a light on global culture from the perspective of an artist with personal experience of life in both the communist and capitalist systems, with insights that appear to have come, at least in part, from a difficulty coping with life in either context. Some of his more commercially-oriented songs, such as "Laser Love" and "Jealous Girl," were produced to satisfy the demands of his record company, Anthem; in interviews, he often railed against commercial pressure to conform, and his resistance to do so led to his being dropped by Anthem, which may have contributed to his eventual descent into obscurity, depression, and finally, suicide (Marton). However, he was able to transform his experiences into an insightful view of the world that spoke to many people. Gábor's dislocated identity, briefly supported by the multiculturalism of Canada, underlay a

critique bound to neither west nor east, but heterotopic. His lyrics paint a picture of an artist who felt stranded between two worlds, at home in neither of them. Despite these existential difficulties, he was able to transform his experiences and feelings into an art form that resonated with many listeners; in the words of a musician who performed and recorded with him, “He was a genius and I was honored to have played with him. . .” (Griffiths). Thirty years after his death, his music is still played on Canadian radio stations, discussed by music critics around the world, shared on social media, and kept alive by a British band who named themselves Moscow Drug Club after the title of one of his songs.⁸

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Notes

¹ Throughout this chapter we use the Hungarian spelling of Gábor’s name, except for passages and titles quoted from Canadian newspapers, magazines, and recordings, where we

quote the spelling as printed. There are also inconsistencies in the way Canadian journalists and his record company spelled his stage name (“B.B. Gabor”; “BB Gabor”).

² All translations from original Hungarian sources in this paper are by Neža Bojnec Naterer.

³ A 1986 recording of a Radio Free Europe (Hungary) broadcast of his music is available on *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3RRhhs-OT4>.

⁴ Available at <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063705091629>.

⁵ A similar observation was made by Gábor’s Canadian contemporaries, the Pukka Orchestra, whose song “Cherry Beach Express” (1981) exposed police brutality against marginalized members of Toronto society.

⁶ Prior to the Soviet invasion on November 4, 1956, Hungarian protesters had demanded free, multiparty elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungarian territory (“The Days of Freedom,” http://www.rev.hu/history_of_56/ora3/ora3_e.htm)

⁷ Jagger and Richards have never explicitly said that the song was about serial killer Albert DeSalvo, but the line “You heard about the Boston...” refers to the nickname given to him in newspaper headlines. David Byrne has said that “Psycho Killer” was based on The Joker and Hannibal Lecter, not on the real-life David Berkowitz.

⁸ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6VzmE3NW_M

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