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Zbigniew Holdys (foreground): Solidarity's favorite rocker

# Poles Apart

BY DOUG SIMMONS

**P**oland, the stage for the first of several stunning upheavals in Eastern Europe, had its own version of Lee Atwater: Zbigniew Holdys. Both play electric guitar. Atwater the frat-boy free-lancer with a solo r&b album in the works, Holdys the leader of Poland's most popular and respected rock band, Perfect, an exceptionally skilled foursome who

played CBGB January 4. Both ran victorious national election campaigns. Republican chairman Atwater, of course, sleazed Bush into the White House. National campaign manager Holdys loaned his grassroots rock syndicate to Solidarity for Poland's June 4 election, which swept the worker's union into 260 of the 261 contested seats and disabled the Communist Party. Before it helped re-

shape Europe, Holdys's agency, the Perfect Organization, had promoted the band's gigs (including stadium concerts drawing 40,000 fans) and boosted its record sales into the millions.

At CBGB Perfect played for a few hundred people, 57 of them on the guest list. It was the kind of event New Yorkers take for granted, another culture's stars coming to one of our dives as unknowns,

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now and suck up to foreign investors, the new government ended most price subsidies and plunged the economy into a free-market system, sending the cost of food, shelter, and other basics soaring. Holdys likened the maneuver to "driving a car 100 miles per hour and you have to make a sudden U-turn." Poland crashed again. "All the nation is broken. No medicine. No transportation. Two weeks ago, there was no matches in the country—can you imagine that?"

Holdys lives in two rooms with his wife and sons, one of 200 families in a 10-story building. "If I have my own apartment in Warsaw, with a small car, it's all the result of very heavy work, even though I sold five million records. You have to remember that all Polish musicians are in some kind of nervous condition. What will be tomorrow? All this even given that you're the biggest star in Polish rock history. 'No future' was said by the punks, but in Poland it's always no future. My son asks me, 'Daddy, why do you have to go to America to work?'"

From 1982 to 1986, during the clamp-down of martial law, the government banned Perfect from performing, because of their lyrics and a growing fear of Polish rockers. Now the economy is the crusher: "One ticket costs about a monthly salary. It's inhuman to do concerts in this way, because I know people will sell clothes or toys just to see us." Not to mention that the money Perfect might make is near worthless. "Right now, my mother has 140,000 zlotys. Right now, two pounds of ham cost 60,000 zlotys. Two pounds of sugar cost 7000 zlotys. Of course, I send her dollars."

Dollars are a primary reason why Perfect is now in America. "I want to sell my records here. I want to be rich. I want to make my son happy, more happy than I was when I was young. Things will get better, maybe, but it may be in the next generation, which is still unborn."

**I**n December Perfect arrived in Elizabeth, New Jersey, hanging out at Scorpio's, a Polish/Greek restaurant where they could perform, sing in their native tongue, and make a few bucks. Holdys hustled up the CBGB gig and began the translations that he knows are essential for an American record deal, of which he is hopeful. "Right now I feel like a person with maybe the greatest chance of my life." So far he has finished 11 English lyrics.

"What we presented in CBGBs was the result of 70 or 80 songs on the records. I've composed about 2000 songs. Maybe 100 are good. Maybe 20 are really good. I decided not to play the best ones, but to play the ones that were easy to translate into English. I decided not to play the biggest hit in Polish history, number one for three months. The title's 'Autobiografia' and it's the story of a person born in Poland in the '50s whose father was a member of the Communist Party." The song describes how the son tunes in Radio Free Europe and "hears 'Blue Suede Shoes' for the first time. It makes him a completely different person."

Holdys estimated it will take two or three weeks of dictionary work to nail down the tale of Carl Perkins, the spy who came in on the airwaves. Oddly, considering its rockabilly inspiration, the music of "Autobiografia," which I've heard on the Polish CD *Perfect 1981-1989* (a commanding and listenable 17-song recording unavailable here), is ominous, the tempo slow. "The song is about a special Polish feeling. In English, the song became poorer. . . . For us it was Radio Luxembourg, and all the time. Every day and night, we'd be trying to hear this, not so loud, because our fathers were afraid. Listening to foreign radio was forbidden. It means, if you're listening to Radio Free Europe, that you're working for the CIA. You could go to jail for it."

For the CBGB performance, Holdys chose accessible titles—"Idol," "Lies Can Kill," "Circus," "Wish I Were a Zillion-

aire," "Golly Gee, the Ball Is Rolling"—all songs that he felt were "a little bit familiar to Americans." This latter criterion might be why the Police came to mind so often during the set, and not just because of the band's frequent reggae beats and accents. Holdys has a sturdy, shiny voice that is similar, albeit with more heart and soul, to Sting's.

When I told Holdys this, our conversation got a little testy. I never cared for Sting's music, Holdys admires some of it. But the influence, which Holdys thought I exaggerated, helped me appreciate Perfect. That's because comparisons between Sting and Holdys, both of whom are 38, crumble as quickly as ones to Atwater. Holdys's rock is deep, felt, and open. Sting's often shallow, false, snobby. Sting looks down his nose in an article he wrote for the current *Street News*: "The whole idea of rock and roll as rebellious music is totally dead. . . . I never liked [it] particularly. . . . I've tried little by little to wean my audience from their expectations. I try to give them something different every time, but that's such a demand on your creative forces."

Holdys, who has already influenced history more than Sting ever will, stands in opposition to such elitism. Without a hint of irony, he said, "Rock 'n' roll means always to be a rebel," a stance he adopted even during the election. Holdys, it shocked me to hear, didn't vote June 4. "I wanted to help those people who are maybe the best chance for the country. . . . I decided to promote [Solidarity], because I found them to be trustworthy. But during the political campaign promises which were given to the nation were not so trustworthy to me."

Four times he has visited America to make money, always to return to his homeland. The first, in 1978, he went to Chicago, where he was in disco singer Basia Trzetrzelewska's backing band. Basia went on to VH-1 stardom. He went back to Poland. A just marketplace would give a measure of similar success to

hoping to knock us out. Perfect were indeed impressive. Likable, sincere to a fault, they're perhaps the finest band to reach us from Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union (except for the Plastic People/Pulnoc). The buzz preceding them dropped the Clash's name a lot, probably because Perfect can crunch at fierce speeds, carry a melody, and ignite white riots. Actually, Dire Straits, the Police, Steely Dan, maybe some R.E.M., some Weather Report, are a lot closer to the mark—a smart, internationally clean, early-'80s mainstream rock sound. Perfect's music may be derivative but not its power; there's an enormous amount of bravery and passion in them, especially in singer Zbigniew Holdys.

"Solidarity needed support from everywhere," Holdys said, "sportsmen and rockers, from professors and scientists. The workers need to have the feeling that they are friends of intellectuals. My friends from Solidarity found me and my band a very good organization, because we did our concerts very good. We were

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some kind of inventors in this case. We did different posters, we did different fliers, we did some, let's say, happenings on the streets. The posters and the videotapes, everything was me and my friends' decisions of what should be done."

With his heavy build, shoulder-length hair, dark glasses, and leather cap, Holdys wouldn't look out of place on a Harley-Davidson. Polite, soft-spoken, but not shy, he hypes his band with arresting bluntness: "the greatest legend in East-European rock." Perfect's press kit claims, "It's possible that we're the best in the world right now," he said while eating fajitas in a restaurant on University Place a few days after the CBGB show. The meal itself opened up a two-hour seminar on his band and country: "We don't have Mexican food in Poland. We don't have Polish food in Poland."

Between sips of Coke—he gave up drinking two years ago when his second son was born—Holdys described a nation more miserable than when the Communists called the shots and ruined things. (Doctors blame the country's foul air and water for a life expectancy that lags 10 years behind the rest of Europe, to cite just one misery indicator.) On January 1, in a desperate attempt to whip inflation

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Holdys, and he insists on it as a right. "Everyone wants to be rich, with a car and color TV, you know what I mean?"

"People want to work in Poland, and they are very hard workers. They want to build the country. I know what I'm going to do, I know what I feel, and I know what I should do. I am not going to leave Poland for good. Of course, if we have the possibility to buy a house here in Manhattan, I will buy it. But right now, I will be a Polish musician because I am a Polish man. I know that nobody in the world is playing this kind of music. There's many good musicians in the United States, and I want to show them. 'OK, we are good also.'"

## Lambada

# Rub-a-Dub

BY JULIAN DIBBELL

**O**távio de Abreu closed his office door and rolled his eyeballs.

"Sorry about the interruption. These musicians. All they want to do is go on TV. They're more interested in looking good than selling good. . . . You saw the face on that guy who just left—there's no way he'll break his record on TV."

"Anyway, where were we?"  
We were in Belém do Pará, northern coast of Brazil, late 1986, at the three-room headquarters of Gravasom records, which Abreu managed. A few blocks away the Amazon River spilled into the Atlantic. A few years away lambada—"dance rage of the '90s," hype job of the '80s—would spill all over the Northern Hemisphere: across the European charts as far as Budapest, onto *Arsenio*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and into New York nightlife, taking over Fridays at the Palladium. But in 1986 it was an Amazonian tale,