

THE  
NEW YORKER

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Two ways to win the Cold War. Option one: a first strike, annihilating the Communist bloc's arsenal of nuclear weapons before they can be launched in retaliation. Option two, no less fraught with risk: send nine white guys, including four horn players and a singer with a penchant for leather pants, to perform Grammy-winning rock and roll behind the Iron Curtain. It is this second course of action that was pursued in 1970, and that is investigated in a knotty new documentary, "What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?"

Nobody would have asked that question in 1969, when "Blood, Sweat & Tears," the second album by the group of the same name, was enthroned for weeks at the top of the charts. It's a witches' brew, kicking off with a riff on Erik Satie and marked by salvos of brass and mid-song shifts in tempo, but the director of the documentary, John Scheinfeld, doesn't dive very deep into the music. Although he has made films about John Coltrane, John Lennon, and Harry Nilsson, what grips him here, understandably, is the particular summer when Blood, Sweat & Tears went on tour to Yugoslavia, Romania, and Poland. It was a revelation, and a fall from grace.

Why did they go? Blackmail, of a sort. The lead vocalist, a Canadian named David Clayton-Thomas, had a voice of tremendous rasp and rumble. He sounded like a volcano making conversation. He was also in danger of losing his green card, and, to avoid that fate, the band's manager struck a dark deal with the U.S. State Department, which wanted American performers who could spread the word, or the groove, behind enemy lines. So the band was dispatched to hot spots such as Zagreb (where the audience was sullenly unresponsive) and Warsaw (the opposite). Scariest of all was Bucharest, where the concert was officially deemed "too successful," where cops with German shepherds were on hand to quash the crowd's delight, where one enthusiast was taken away and beaten for requesting an autograph, and where "people don't enjoy the privilege of spontaneous outburst," as Clayton-Thomas reported, back in L.A. He added, "It's given us all a new appreciation of various freedoms that we took for granted."

That was true, but it was an unforgivable truth—anathema to those in the counterculture for whom America held a monopoly on repression. Blood, Sweat & Tears were reviled in the press as a “fascist rock band” in the making, and as “pig-collaborators” by Abbie Hoffman, who never had the pleasure of protesting in Bucharest. More than it knows, this movie is an engaging, and sometimes enraging, exposé of chronic insularity. (I suggest viewing it as an ironic footnote, or a bonus track, to “The Free World,” a consummate study of the period by my colleague Louis Menand.) One of the group’s biggest hits, “And When I Die,” contains the line “All I ask of living is to have no chains on me.” Look closely at the footage of the Romanian fans, at a gig, and you will see a pair of hands raised high in celebration. They are joined together by a chain. ♦

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