

Rock Subculture In a Small Town – Forms and Strategies of Identification

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THE RESEARCH

Rock culture has a long history, but in Bulgaria it became popular in the 1960s. Gradually and with varying intensity, it spread from the capital and major cities to the periphery. This article is part of the scientific project “Youth subcultures in post-socialist Bulgaria”¹. The main objective of the present study is to trace the formation of rock and heavy metal subculture in the context of a particular small town in Bulgaria on the border between two political “eras.” The topic was chosen for several reasons. Most of the research related to youth subcultures in the field of anthropology and sociology focuses on the situation in larger cities. The study of a small subcultural community, which remains in many aspects away from the cultural and information flows but tries to express and assert its identity, would allow a more dense cognitive picture of youth (sub)culture in Bulgaria; it would also shed some light on how the micro communities construct their identities and enter in the macro framework of the rock culture and youth culture in general.

How was the local rock fans community different from the subculture in the bigger cities in Bulgaria at that period? At first, the rock fans in the small towns were less numerous than in bigger ones. Most of them usually knew each other and engaged in different interactions. This is the reason why in the particular small town there was not a firm differentiation between fans of different styles of rock music. The members of the particular groups could

like other pop music styles as well. In bigger cities of Bulgaria there was (and still there is) a greater degree of differentiation between the fans according to music style preferences; tension and competition among the communities could arise. Unlike the big cities, competition between the youth groups (companies) was rare or did not exist in small towns, because the preference of the music style was not decisive for their formation. Also, all groups had a similar lifestyle and ‘occupied’ common places, while trying to escape the adults’ control.

Another very important characteristic of the small and peripheral town’s context is the limited access to information, new music, ideas and other objects related to young people’s musical interests in the period of socialism and soon after that. Striving to discover new music and to supply favorite records was an essential element of the rock fan’s life and all melomans in the socialist period. Young people from Bulgaria used different means to supply new records, albums, magazines, posters, etc. – through relatives, who lived abroad (usually in socialist or border countries) or through other acquaintances traveling abroad. In Western and Northwestern Bulgaria, where the particular researched town is situated, the main source of delivery was the annual Bulgarian-Yugoslavian cross-border festival.

Being less numerous and living in a more or less conservative social environment, the fans from the smaller towns were much more visible and exposed to formal and informal institutions’ control and supervision in the socialist period compared to those from the bigger cities. These factors made the local rock communities more cohesive and distinguishable from the surrounding social environ-

¹ The project is managed by Dr. Vihra Barova, IEFSEM - BAS and funded by the NSF competition “Young Scientists – 2011”.

ment. Although away from the main informational flows, many of them were able to shape a specific lifestyle and influence local everyday life.

The selected town is a good example of how the youth subculture movements are popularized. It also reflects the influence they have had on the everyday culture of the peripheral regions of the country since the late 1960s² and the continuity between several generations of rock fans. It was selected for several reasons. It is a small and peripheral town in the North-West part of Bulgaria, next to the Bulgarian-Serbian border. Many people would describe it as a 'normal' Bulgarian town. In the socialist period it developed some industries as well as agriculture. On a local level it was popular as a tourist destination for balneological treatments and its proximity to the mountains. After the transformations in 1989 the largest and most profitable factories and the balneological centre were closed and destroyed. The town lost its previous positions in the industry, agriculture and tourism. In the 90s it was known as one of the settlements with the highest rate of unemployment. Nowadays the Bulgarian North-West is regarded as the poorest region of the EU.

The researched town is also interesting because the history of its rock culture can be traced back to the 60s of the 20th century. In the late 60s and early 70s a stable core of rock fans was formed. They were mostly boys and young men who started to distinguish themselves from the mass consumers of the popular music at that time. They tried to express their individuality by demonstrating various codes of rock culture and thus emulating the

2 Yancheva, Y. 2012: Rock Culture in the Small Town in the 60s and early 70s. – Bulgarian Ethnology, 4. ISSN: 1310-5213. (to be published)

youth from the Western world. According to them, what united and made them 'rock fans' were the parties, where they listened, played and shared music, discuss various musical themes, sometimes even some minor hooliganism or just the fact that they recognized their similar lifestyle and musical tastes. Many of them think that one of the most important characteristic of the rock fans' identity in Bulgaria was the shared experience in resisting the formal institutional and systemic control over their interests, lifestyle and appearance. In that period their behavior and interests in Western music was perceived by the socialist institutions (central and local government, Communist party and 'Komsomol's'³ leadership, militia⁴, schools, etc.) as 'decadent' and even 'immoral' behavior and contrary to the 'socialist values'; therefore they were subjected to control by the authorities.

Since the second half of the 70s and in the 80s rock music became more widely popular among young people in that town. Each subsequent generation of rock fans formed a pref-

3 'Komsomol' was the popular name of Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union – the communist youth organization in Bulgaria in the period from 1946 to 1990. It was national in scope and the only youth organization in the country directly managed by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). The members of the organization were called '*komsomoltsi*' (komsomolians) and were admitted to it after the age of 14 years and after passing through pioneering organizations 'Chavdarche' (up to 9 years old) and Dimitrov's Pioneers' Organization (DPO) 'Septemvriyche' (between 9 and 14 years).

4 'Militia' is the name of the police forces of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries at that period. In Bulgaria in 1944 the so-called 'People's Militia' was established in place of the police system before the period of socialism. After the political transformation in Bulgaria the name was changed to 'National Police'.

erence for a harder sound: from rock & roll and hard rock, through heavy metal, thrash metal to hard core in the 90s. At that time the institutional sanctions gradually weakened and were related mainly to 'improper' appearance.

The third significant reason to choose the studied town is my position of an 'insider'. Born in the same town, I have been a part of the local rock community since the 90s of the 20th century and in some respects until now. This position helps me to gain a deeper insight into the dynamics and the development of the community using my own experience and recollections. Knowing rock fans from different generations and social positions, I was able to conduct sincere and open interviews and to collect sometimes quite intimate personal information, which otherwise would be difficult to share with strangers.

Since the research is still in progress and offers intermediate results, the use of the term "subculture" here is based on Sarah Thornton's broad definition. She defines subcultures as social groups that are perceived as originating and deviating from the normative ideals governed by adults (Thornton 1997). They are mostly informal and organic, and their members are united by the principle of personal choice (although there are exceptions). Thornton states that subcultures are often perceived by themselves and (or) by the society as deviant or as representatives of the lowest strata in the social hierarchy. They operate on the basis of shared consciousness of belonging to the "otherness" and the "difference" in the context of the large and dominant culture.

The present research studies the local rock community's forms of identification and its strategies to differentiate itself from the surrounding society. The article focuses on two youth groups of rock fans, who were in their teens and early twenties in the late 1980s

and early 1990s and formed the image of the emerging subculture in the town at that period. I will try to outline their main features and to compare their strategies of identification in the context of the wider cultural environment, in which they exist, as well as their strategies of defending and, most of all, manifesting their diversity. The research methods are participant observation and thematic and biographical interviews with the rock community members who were born in the 1970s. I will keep the identity of the respondents and the name of the town in secret due to the nature of the shared information and due to the fact that some of the informants interviewed for the project, not only for this particular article, still have conflicts with police and other institutions. All personal names and place names are changed or omitted.

THE CONTEXT

The historical events in the late 1980s marked the period when the local rock community began to consolidate, identify itself and state its presence in the social and cultural life of the town. During the socialist period, as everywhere in Bulgaria, each successive generation of fans managed to „earn“ certain „freedoms“, associated with their own perception of demonstrating rock identity. However, life and circumstances in the small town continued to create a number of restrictions arising from the public control and administrative supervision. While trying to avoid the institutional or parental control or demonstrating firmly their 'otherness', some rock fans took actions, which resulted in their marginalization by the institutions. This will be shown in the next section. Despite the clashes with the militia/police, they were not criminalized.

In the period immediately before and after 1989, a number of political, historical and

social changes took place. They include the process of 'Perestroika', the weakening of the institutional influence and control of the school and the youth party structures ('Komsomol' and Pioneers' organization) over the youths' personal lives and opportunities for development. The opportunities for exposure to western music and culture also expanded, while people increasingly gained access to modern items and attributes associated with a particular style. Later a transition to democratic government and the market economy took place with all its cultural, social, economic and political consequences. These changes were a prerequisite for the young people to feel more freedom (compared to the previous generations) in their actions of breaking and removing the social, political and administrative restrictions imposed on their behavior and in the ability to demonstrate their identity. This sense of the occurrence of „freedom“ is typical not only for the rock fans, but for most young people of this generation. Some of their actions, which demonstrate the „emancipation“ from the old socialist canons, are often scandalous and shocking to the older generations.

TWO EXAMPLES OF ROCK FANS' IDENTITY FROM A SMALL TOWN IN BULGARIA:

THE 'HOOLIGANS'

It is no coincidence that those rock fans from the town who had the most violent confrontation with the police/militia and who acquired a lasting image of „bullies“ ('hooligans') in public opinion are representatives of the generation of young people who were 15 to 20 years old in the period between 1987 and 1992. Such provocative actions were, for example, the noisy home parties with loud hard rock and metal music (both western or eastern music), the provocative clothing, hair

style and accessories, more frequent absence from school, the unlimited consumption of alcohol and cigarettes; all of these factors led to a constant game of „cat and mouse“ with local agents of the police/militia and the juvenile delinquency council, who were reluctant to give up their recent power to „re-discipline the youth“. This game of „cat and mouse“ sometimes spilled over into open deliberate clashes with these agents (such as, for example, unconcealed nagging and insults of police officers, 'conquering' of the local police station before 1989, beating a specialist from the juvenile delinquency council etc.). All of these examples were a part of the „repertoire“ of the members of one of the most visible groups of rock fans in the town at that time, whose behavior often caused arrests. It was therefore perceived by the public as a scandal and it contributed to their image of „hooligans“.

One of the members of this group talks about this time, hyperbolizing the „heroism“ in his youth:

I spent part of my adolescence under the old regime and a then another part under the new one. (...) So the difference ... The old regime was even more interesting, 'cause a lot odd stuff was forbidden. We were allowed to do almost nothing, but we did everything. When the so-called democracy came, everything was allowed and almost nothing could be done. 'Cause there was no way to do it. In general, when I was a teenager, everything was just freedom, freedom, freedom ... We lived without a care in the world. It was all in the name of fun. All we ever thought about was how to have fun, how to have a good time and we actually didn't care about anything. This was at the beginning of my teenage years at the end of the old (political) regime. At the beginning of the new regime I was in the army. (...) And later after the army – the new regime, the dawn of democracy: nothing interesting really. It

was interesting ... when everything was banned, but we did everything despite the ban. (...) So we had long hair, we wore military boots, we wore leather pants, colorful clothes, and generally we did things that were forbidden. (...) It was all forbidden and it was interesting and it was cool... And not everyone ventured to do it.

(Y. Y.) - *How did the society accept you?*
 - (...) *Normally – like outsiders.*
 (Y. Y.) - *Did you feel like that? Like outsiders?*
 - *No, no. They treated us like that. (...) I didn't give a damn about how the society saw me, 'cause I don't take anything from society and it can't give me anything that I don't want. And even if I want something, it still can't give it to me, so society isn't a corrective. After school, of course... (we had to go to school after all) we gathered together to have fun and to make things more interesting; there was alcohol ... We didn't use other things (He means drugs). (...) It's just that we were under 18 years old, and alcohol was something society wouldn't approve of... (...) A couple of beers and a little bit of brandy and vodka, and it was all done to demonstrate opposition against the society. That was the point: to do it, 'cause it wasn't allowed.*
 (Y. Y.) - *How did you challenge the society?*
 - *No, no, no. We did not challenge it. We just demonstrated that we did not care about this society. We didn't want to challenge it (...) ... we just wanted to demonstrate that we did not care. We wanted to show them we didn't care about those shitty ideologies and norms of behavior. That was it.*

I have to mention that the company was boyish, but a girly “fan club” gravitated around it especially in the later years.⁵ Al-

5 At that time the companies were predominantly male because the school-aged girls were still rendered more control over their behavior, people they met with, and the time to come home. This is why the girls joined the company after finishing school and only for partying as girlfriends or suitors of the male half. They remained in the

though the interviewee denies it, the conversation shows that there was a conscious desire of teenagers to provoke, to shock the society. They perceive this behavior as a “rebellion” against the socialist system, but not in political and economic terms, but in the terms of the only system that they knew so far and that put certain restrictions on their actions. It included the educational and disciplinary institutions like the school, the Komsomol and Pioneers’ organization, militia, the juvenile delinquency council, to some extent their parents and the adults’ world as a whole, with their ethical and aesthetic code, also the forms of public control such as the public opinion, rumors, gossip etc.

The mentioned various repertoire of challenging acts against the society is defined by the interviewee as a form of freedom, as “free expression of personality” which was not underpinned by concrete political beliefs. But it should be noted that this assessment by the interviewee of his youthful behavior as “rebellion for freedom” is influenced to some extent by the euphoria of the large protest movement in Bulgaria in the early 1990s. The restrictions, which caused the “rebellion”, pervaded the lives of all young people under socialism. These were constraints on appearance, especially at school, restrictions on the use of alcohol and cigarettes – one of the actions with which boys demonstrate and declare their masculinity, also the restrained access to their favorite music and above all the existing demonizing public image of the unaesthetic, immoral, hooligan and deviant nature of rock culture as a whole, which is not a unique phenomenon neither in the studied town, nor in socialist Bulgaria.

periphery of the group without participating in other activities.

According to the interviewee, his peers' "rebellion" meant to do everything that was prohibited or was perceived as wrong and outrageous. They opposed their behavior to the long preached pioneer and Komsomol principles of "modesty", "neatness", "obedience", "uniformity", "decency", "good behavior", etc. Thus, they declared disdain for the imposed rules and regulations and also distinguished themselves from other peers and the larger public with the image of "outsiders" or "hooligans". The interviews and the actions of all members of the company show their desire to be seen, identified, and recognized.

The collisions between the teenagers from this group, on the one hand, and society and institutions, on the other hand, appear as a vicious circle. As I mentioned before, the youths' interest in and preference for Western music were generally perceived by the socialist ideology and the socialist authority's agents as "decadent" culture, contrary to the "socialist values".⁶ This is why the rock fans in Bulgaria and in other socialist countries were subjected to public censorship and „educational pressure“ by state institutions. Karin Taylor argues that the „moral panic“, prompted by the Bulgarian Communist Party and the government, was motivated primarily by the idea that rock music and rock culture threatened the socialist value system as a whole, rather than the notion of a possible deviant behavior associated with specific subcultural groups in the Western world (Taylor 2006: 122). However, these ideas made the youth popular culture in the socialist period a problem of the official state policy and ideology, which led to its politicization. These political perceptions remained

6 Karin Taylor presents in detail the ideological propaganda against the effects of Western culture (Taylor 2006: 78-80, 120-123).

influential on the broader part of the public opinion in Bulgaria even after the transformations in 1989.

On the other side, the interviewee believes that the revolt against the usual, against the imposed image of "normality", the freedom to do whatever they wanted, without complying with any rules, were characteristics of the members of the studied company, which distinguished them as a subcultural group. They were united by the shared common consciousness of belonging to the "otherness" and the "difference" in the context of the dominant culture. Trying to avoid and to resist the public and the institutional control, to deviate from the 'normality' established by the adults and the common ideology with a different range of actions as mentioned above, the members of this group were marginalized. However, they did not recognize their behavior ('rebellion') as a characteristic of the 'rock identity' as the public opinion accepted it. Their actions were caused by the teenagers' desire to defend the right to demonstrate their personal identity and mostly to stand out from the mass. They perceived the society's image of them (the local rock fans) as 'hooligans' in an idealistic manner, reflecting it as a matter of pride. They also answered this perception, while trying to strengthen it with actions and behavior, which were supposed to provoke, shock, and scandalize society. The members of this group tend to idealize and present their youth in terms of heroism in the strongest degree compared to all other generations of rock fans in the town.

Although the popular perception as 'hooligans', the strong collisions with the militia/police, which sometimes led to arrests, and the constant supervision by this institution, it would be improper to suppose that these

teenagers' actions were criminalized. Two reasons are admitted: An obvious reason is that one of the boys' fathers was a very influential lawyer with strong connections in the party and local government. This allowed his son to be a central figure in the youth company, demonstrating the most provocative behavior. The other reason, which could be assumed, is that the agents of militia/police often relied on personal, informal connections to deal with the bullies. This reason is appropriate in the context of dominant informal relations in the small town.

THE 'ARTISTS'

However the so-called group of „hooligans“ is not a representative of all rock fans in the studied town. Another wider group of fans, which I will call the group of „artists“, existed at the same time among representatives of the same generation. It included some young boys (high-school students at the end of the 80s), who were the first in the town to play heavy and trash metal, and their friends. Among them some companies were formed, and the musicians established some students' bands, the most popular of which were 'Likvidator' or 'Klada'. Sometimes members of one band could play in other bands as well. After finishing school three of the 'musicians' (perhaps more visible and recognizable) went to university in a bigger town of central Bulgaria. There they met other friends and established the band called 'Falsh'. It played in the local bars and at the university, and became popular among the students and other local young people. The band gained the support of other musicians from the host town and even had a few concerts in the capital and other smaller towns. It existed until its members went to university.

Here is an abstract from the interview

with one of the 'musicians' from the studied town in Northwestern Bulgaria. He is talking about his band's first concert in the high school gym:

'Concert', the word appeared itself. 'There will be a concert!' So started an endless specification of details: when should it be; negotiations with the Komsomol leader; several conversations with the school director, [he said] we had to behave properly, no alcohol was allowed; we had to be careful, to keep the property and again alcohol wasn't appropriate. We promised everything, even things the director himself wasn't sure we would keep. The trick was to make things happen.

And we began scheduling rehearsals, which were almost never observed. Something unexpected always came up; we were constantly searching for some devices, cables, stands. There was always something missing. Sometimes there are moments, when you think nothing will happen. But the most important thing was to have fun, to 'stir' the daily routines, to make something to happen... And a concert for a small town was something big.

It was full of "well-wishers" – some teachers and parents, but this (their negative attitude) motivated us even more. We were hinted that it wasn't desirable to play heavy metal. Even if we wanted to play heavy metal, we could not play. We were totally amateurs. (Laughing.) Three chords, a few 'rokcheta'... (diminutive slang of 'rock songs') (Playing Purple was mandatory).. How did some people sing? "Smokan dilokar." (He is joking about the way some people, who did not speak English, called 'Smoke on the water') Also several authors' songs... Lyrics and music were written by all of us together. Sometimes friends also wrote lyrics for us.

The day of the concert was coming... There was bustle yet from the morning. Carrying of the equipment, putting everything in order on the stage, 'something is missing again', looking for it and trying to find other missing stuff... And at

that time it wasn't like it is now – there weren't mobile phones, net... (internet) Actually there wasn't anything.

Before the concert they (the school director or the Komsomol leader) warned us once again [that we had] to be careful, not to do foolish things. I don't know how they imagined these 'foolish things'. It was foolish to prohibit young people from having fun, from 'blowing off steam' from time to time. Rock originated from the lowest classes, from the western working class's youth. They were our 'brother proletarians'... I still don't understand why they (the authority) didn't allow us to listen to their music. We could influence them. (He is joking and speaking with sarcasm.) All these exchanges could be bi-directional, not just as it was from west to east and even then 'through a needle's eye'. (He means that it was difficult to listen to rock, because it was forbidden.) They couldn't understand what the vent is rock.

But that time we didn't care. The important thing was the concert. We could play whatever we wanted and we were able to. And we didn't care what would happen after that. Finally we gathered everything, or almost everything, but basically we were ready. Someone brought a bottle of rakia (Bulgarian brandy), some wine... Everyone is 'shaken' by stage fright. But we refrained from getting very drunk... Our mind prevailed, knowing that we totally couldn't do anything if we were drunk.

The show run away as it was out of time, there was so much euphoria and adrenaline that all flash-backs appeared like separate movie frames. The gym was full with students, teachers and some parents, friends... Girls... Even some of us did it for the first time. (Winking.) Damage was minimal – only two chairs and a microphone. There were also some dissatisfied people, of course. 'Very loudly!... What are these songs! We can't understand anything...' We tricked them to think we were playing Soviet songs as well, which brought us praise from the director.

As the interview shows, the 'artists' also could provoke the public with their actions. For example, they organized noisy concerts and parties with lots of alcohol, practiced music skills during the commonly accepted relaxation time, had eccentric behavior and provocative appearance, sometimes even to a greater extent than the others (e.g. flagrant make-up, fishnet shirts and leggings, large and visible tattoos). However, if they caused any provocation of the institutions and the local public, they did it through (their) music and because of music. For example, the hard rock style had not entered the local music scene before, and their live performances, albeit with a limited audience, were not organized by any local cultural institution. The music itself was the reason for any clashes between them and the local state agents. As stated in the interview, they had to negotiate with the school director and Komsomol leader for permission to organize a concert. They were sanctioned by the Komsomol organization in cases of damage and complain because of the loud music, aggressive sound or the 'improper' lyrics. They were also sanctioned because of the expectation that their music was provoking their fans to engage in immoral behavior. For example, head-banging, moshing, jumping, kissing and other intimate relations between boys and girls were regarded as rude, improper, indecent and even deviant behavior. Because of this, gigs in the town garden (which was very close to the militia station) were observed strictly by the agents of militia, the juvenile delinquency council and the Komsomol. However, there were no significant clashes between the musicians, their friends and the institutions.

Unlike the so-called 'hooligans', most of the 'artists' were united by their audiophile passion for rock and metal. For them, music

was a means of expressing their identity and it made them less visible to the wider public. In order to distinguish themselves and demonstrate their identity as “different” from the mass, they did not need to deliberately scandalize the society or to be seen and recognized as ‘outsiders’. They wanted to be recognized as musicians. Most of all, they therefore needed an opportunity to play and perform their music. The music was the most common reason for clashes with state institutions. The members of the ‘artist’ companies think that creating own music, performing it and struggling with the institutions to perform it were the things that consolidated and identified them as ‘different’. The shared common consciousness of being hard rock and heavy metal fans and musicians, who played ‘the forbidden music’, united and distinguished them as a subcultural group, but did not marginalize them.

These bands, which were the first youth bands in the town which performed a harder sound of rock and metal, became recognizable and inspired young musicians from the next generation. They played famous and own original songs and sometimes did some gigs at schools, in the local disco club or the garden in the town centre. ‘Likvidator’, for example, made some demo records and their music became popular and recognizable among the majority of their peer rock fans in the town and in some neighboring towns. Their demos were even popular among the next generation of teenagers in the mid-1990s. I remember that they were spread and re-recorded on tape and cassette recorders and it was a matter of pride to find their album. The presence of harder styles of music on the local scene was considerably intensified in the 90s and early twenty-first century; it would even briefly influence the development of rock festival culture not

only in the region but throughout the country.

CONCLUSION.

THE LOCAL ROCK COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE

Both studied groups did not exist in isolation from one another. They were examples of two different contents of rock identity constructed in the manner in which its representatives themselves regarded as “rocky”. For the first group, being ‘rock fans’ meant being free to imitate the western fan’s behavior and to stand out of the mass. For the second group being ‘rocky’ meant playing and creating their favorite music. These groups were visible and identifiable as belonging to the rock culture, but they were not unique. In late 1980s and early 1990s, there were other companies of fans in the town who were in constant interactions with each other and had their own similar or completely different strategies of demonstrating their identity. Yet all these youth companies were unified within the framework of the local rock community due to two main reasons – the preference for rock and metal music and the desire to ‘break normality’, as reflected by adults and their institutions.

The generation of the late 80s and early 90s was the first which managed to gain some youth subcultural features to the local rock community, because they were more consolidated. In previous periods there were many fans and companies as well, who tried to identify themselves as different, but their relationships between each other and their actions in practicing rock culture were more individual. Unlike them, the fans who were aged 16 to 20 in-between two political eras gradually began to recognize themselves as sharing the same culture and to consolidate a community based on their common interests and ‘struggles’.

Their behavior and messages created a number of conflicts and a generational gap.

Mannheim argues that these occur during times of generational change when persistent norms, concepts and categories of thought of an older generation subsequently expire or disappear in future generations (Mannheim 1952: 299). These conflicts between the generations figured prominently in the stories of youth, in which confronting and deviating from the forms of normative ideals of the adults are portrayed as 'heroic' acts or a 'rebellion for freedom'. For many members of the rock community at this period the collision and 'struggles' with the adults and institutions (at any range – from negotiating school gigs to fights with and arrests by militia officers) were some of the important features of rock and metal identity. At the same time, the rock fans (and all young people in general) tended to show the public (through their behavior) that they belonged to another era (in cultural, social, political and historical aspects), which required a new ethical and aesthetic code, and a new type of relations between the generations.

Although the preference for rock and metal music was the most distinguishable feature of the local community, it is difficult to say that its 'rock features' were very distinct as it was in the bigger cities of Bulgaria. The individual members of the community had different ideas of what it meant to be a "rock fan". Various youth groups assumed different images of "otherness", with which they sought to declare their presence in the social space of the town. The rock-fan look was not considered necessary, but each company demonstrated its own form and taste of eccentricity. At the same time, the movement from one group to another was very common. Some fans developed a taste for new wave, punk, glam rock and other styles as well, but in the small town the companies did not have a strongly distinct style. The groups were often formed

on the basis of previous relations at school, in the neighborhood or sports teams and their members were fans of a wide range of rock styles – from harder to more melodic rock. The peripheral members of the groups may have liked other styles of music as well.

At the teen stage, the members of the groups were mostly boys, but after finishing school they were joined by many girls. The core of the groups was predominantly male, while the girls formed the periphery – a trend which strongly declined in the 90s. All young people during the studied period "inhabited" the same places – the only disco club in the town, the garden in the town centre, the park around the ancient fortress. At the end of the 1980s some illegal music traders appeared. They continuously imported and distributed new music which expanded the musical culture of young people from the town. Home parties, for any personal occasion (such as birthdays or name days) or just to listen to a new record, also became popular.

The study of the rock and metal fans from the late 1980s and early 90s reveals the changes in youth culture that occurred as a result of political and social transformations in Bulgaria at that time. This generation also marks the beginning of the consolidation of the rock community in the town. For example, the popularity and the experience of the youth metal bands from the late 80s inspired and influenced the latter development of the local rock and metal scene and the increasing number of youth bands in the next period. Thus, the second half of 90s and the early years of the 21st century heralded the culmination of the formation of rock subculture in the town. During this phase, it took on its clearest and most distinguishable features and its members shared a common life. In the end of the century the local rock community had an essential

presence in the towns' cultural life, organizing many small concerts for local bands and even some popular Bulgarian ones. Despite the economic situation of the region, it initiated the foundation and organization of one of the first rock festivals in the country.

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