

**“TWO THUMBS UP!”**

*Screening at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, CO*

# ***FREE TO ROCK***

## **HOW ROCK AND ROLL HELPED END THE COLD WAR**

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By Doug Brown

**IF** January 1, 1946 is the unofficial “birthday” of the Baby Boom Generation; **IF** March 5, 1946 is the unofficial recognition of the Cold War with Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech; **IF** June 26, 1963 is the unofficial declaration that the Berlin Wall would ultimately fail with President Kennedy’s “Ich Bin Ein Berliner” speech; **IF** June 12, 1987 is the unofficial invitation for the Soviet Union to “Tear Down This Wall” with President Reagan’s speech; and **IF** November 9, 1989 is the official date of the fall of the Berlin Wall; **THEN** May of 1977 is the unofficial confluence of all these events when the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band became the first rock and roll band of the Baby Boom Generation to tour the Soviet Union and appear on Soviet television, encouraging, empowering and ultimately enabling a nascent generation of Soviet rockers to help make the cultural changes within the Soviet Union that helped lead to the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall and ultimately the Soviet Union itself.

Producers Nick Binkley (Colorado College Alum, class of `68), Stas Namin, Jim Brown and Doug Yeager, in their film *FREE TO ROCK*, tell the amazing story of a successful cultural revolution that is achieved without a shot being fired. While many factors, forces and personalities contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the causes of its ultimate demise were culturally related. The producers effectively and movingly tell this story through the use of interviews, film clips and a wonderful soundtrack.

Prior to President Carter authorizing the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s 1977 tour of the Soviet Republics of Georgia, Armenia, Latvia and Russia, the primary, if not the only way residents of the Soviet Union could hear news about and from the United States and our European allies was through Radio Free Europe (RFE), Radio Liberty, Voice of America (VOA), American Forces Radio (AFN), and from pirate radio stations located off the coast of Great Britain. Radio Free Europe, which was secretly funded by the CIA, played

hit songs from the West while telling stories about the artist's lives and the meaning of their songs to their rock-starved listening audience behind the Iron Curtain. While providing independent news and information to listeners behind the Iron Curtain was the primary mandate of the U.S. - funded broadcasters, music and literature programs of RFE and VOA, especially broadcasts of banned works by blacklisted artists and authors, buoyed the spirit of a people denied not only political, but also cultural freedom. However, from almost the earliest days of their broadcasts, much of RFE's and VOA's content was electronically banned or jammed by the Soviets with their 2,500 radio jamming stations erected around the borders of the Iron Curtain.

As well intentioned and effective as these radio broadcasts may have been, they could not compare to the impact of the live concerts and TV appearances of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (which were attended and viewed by an estimated 145 million Soviet citizens), and subsequent American and British rock groups that toured the Soviet Union and the Soviet controlled territories of Eastern Europe. Imagine had Ed Sullivan merely played a recording of the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" on his February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1964 TV show instead of having the Fab Four live. It is doubtful Beatlemania and the British Invasion would have been quite as impactful as history proved them to be. Likewise, without American and British rock groups touring the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain nations, it is doubtful that the music would have had as significant a cultural impact as it proved to have, nor would the personal relationships among established Western music stars and dissident, aspiring Soviet and Eastern European musicians been created.

As a "founding member" of the Baby Boom Generation (Class of 1946), I have very clear memories of atomic and nuclear bomb "duck and cover under your desk" school drills throughout the 1950s, discussions with my parents about building a nuclear fallout shelter in the backyard of our Indiana home, JFK's Cuban Missile Crisis address from the Oval Office, and numerous attempted revolts within Iron Curtain Countries, including the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring.

If I had to use just two words to describe why I so enjoyed and appreciated watching *FREE TO ROCK* they would be understanding and hope. The most important new *understanding* that I gained is that the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union was essentially achieved through a cultural revolution that did not involve a single shot fired. While rock and roll music and musicians were not the only reason for this successful revolution, they certainly "played" an important role in how the Soviet and Iron Curtain youth reflected the cultural transition in their societies behind the Iron Curtain that contributed to the peacefulness of the revolution. And lastly, *hope*. *Hope* that in the not too distant future a documentary akin to *FREE TO ROCK* will tell the story of how a similar peaceful resolution occurred through cultural exchange of one of our many current world crises or conflicts. This is the most comforting contribution of this great film.

Colorado College Alum, and producer of the film Nick Binkley, led a 45 minute discussion of the film and its thesis with the packed audience in the auditorium.

