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## Nostalgic Reminiscences: Urbanization, Music and Television of the 1960's

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This study focuses on new trends in Lithuanian culture in the 1960s: socialist urbanization, popular music and the very first television programs. The article will describe the themes of popular songs, musical styles, and cultural context of that time in order to determine the reasons for their popularity: why are songs created in the Soviet era remembered with nostalgia, and what is their appeal for the present-day listener?

Within the Soviet period the 1960s were marked by a wave of liberalism and are therefore referred to as a time of political and cultural 'thaw'. During this decade, there was a shift in attitudes within the Lithuanian society: resistance towards the Soviet occupation and its political system was replaced by a hope that Soviet society could be just. The younger generation actually believed in the Soviet ideals and enthusiastically worked to create a new Soviet Lithuania. Concrete became the economic symbol of the sixties; all Soviet cities were surrounded by factories and districts of concrete apartment blocks. Urban growth encouraged cultural changes as well – a wave of modern culture swept over Lithuania. Television, radio programs and the press spread a youthful optimism, which sounded especially joyful in songs created during that era.

This 'thaw' and its musical expression became a special phenomenon of Lithuanian culture when the National Television claimed the songs of this era to be part of its tradition. During the celebration of the TV's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

sary, a visual documentary called 'Fifty Singing Memories, 1957–2007' was released, which presented interesting material from the television archives. During various jubilee commemorations, these popular songs were presented alongside historical footage and black and white movies. The songs were introduced as classics of Lithuania's popular culture and as a retro trend. The entire style of living in the sixties was presented with great nostalgia. On the screen one often saw musical stars from that legendary decade, who talked about their spare time activities, their fashions, friends, travels, movie theaters, coffee houses, etc...

During 2008–09 several TV projects were initiated in which old songs were given a new life – they were interpreted by the old stage veterans as well as by young, contemporary singers. Thanks to these programs a new bond was formed between the different generations of Lithuanian pop performers. At the same time, viewers were led to believe that there are lasting values even in the world of entertainment.

### **New Roofs of Vilnius**

Let us travel back to the 1960s by picking up the first issues of *Kultūros Barai* (*Cultural Fields*), a monthly journal, which was first published in 1965. Young, ambitious contributors to this journal did not want to reiterate the required Stalinist definitions of culture and instead searched for new ways of thinking, calling for a more contemporary evaluation of current cultural phenomena. The recent changes in the urban environment are broadly described in articles included in the journal's section called 'Epochs Walk the Streets.' Their authors take pleasure in the fact that there are more and more streets in Vilnius where the new style of life is becoming more evident:

Having stepped off the major street, Red Army Prospect, we find ourselves in a cozy environment, where in its wide expanse stand residential buildings with appealing patterns on the facades, sparkling windows and colorful balconies. Clusters of green pine trees, reaching toward the sky, imbue more life into the surroundings. In the sunlight and in the shadow of the pines children play cheerfully. [...] How quickly the Red Army Prospect has changed, almost beyond the point of recognition! Already a third

nine-story building is going up along with extensive quarters of five-story residences. Old wooden single story homes that stood near the street are steadily disappearing. The same process is rapidly taking place on other streets. (Bučiūtė 1965: 5).

It is understandable that the topic of urban change was included in popular songs. Perhaps the most characteristic of them is the swing-style song, 'The Roofs of Vilnius' (text by E. Juškevičius, music Mikas Vaitkevičius), which poeticizes the renewed capital of Soviet Lithuania:

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Senieji Vilniaus stogai, Nušviesti ryto spindulių, Aušra nušvinta rausvai, Ir aš miegoti negaliu. Nešuosi mintį, Vilniau, tais rytais Tave dabinti vis naujais stogais: Dabinti, dabinti, dabinti! Naujieji Vilniaus stogai, Užgimę vidury dienos, Balkonai, šviesūs langai Nerimsta, prašosi dainos. Ir aš dainuoju pilna krūtine: – Jaunasis Vilniau, tu suprask mane: Aš jaunas, tu jaunas, aš jaunas!	The old roofs of Vilnius, Lit by the morning light The dawn turns rosy, And I cannot sleep. On such mornings, oh Vilnius, I'm thinking That I should adorn you with new roofs: Adorn, adorn, adorn! The new roofs of Vilnius, Born at midday, Airy balconies, bright windows Beg for a song. And I sing at the top of my lungs: – Young Vilnius, you must understand me: I'm young, you're young, I'm young!
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Today the socialist constructions are viewed in a negative light since they were erected in place of destroyed historical sites, and the uniform buildings, set out like boxes, have scarred the urban landscape. But at that time, the new constructions represented the growth of socialist economy, and great pride was taken in them. Therefore, these apartment blocks, symbolizing a contemporary and modern city, were captured on many video clips accompanying songs from the sixties.

Watching the 1965 video clip for 'The Roofs of Vilnius', it is interesting to observe the performers – young, stylish fellows driving along in a convertible through the streets of Vilnius. Judging by appearances, they follow western fashions, yet they are not so rebellious as to pose a threat to the Soviet system. Cheerful, friendly and energetic young men may be perceived as 'positive heroes'. As we know, the depiction of such heroes was one of the main tasks

of socialist art. If, in the films of the war and post-war decades the positive hero was one who fought the enemy, walked through fire and water and even sacrificed his life for the sake of a bright future, then in the arts of the 1960s the image of the hero changed. During these years of peace, the hero was depicted as a shock worker of communist labor, whose main achievement was committed and selfless work. Every member of society could be such a hero, not only persons overly dedicated to communism's ideals. Thus we may assert that the slightly wild fellows in the film did not upset the censors because they were regarded as Soviet youths who were building their new life and happy about it.

Reading the press from the sixties and listening to the songs of that decade, we notice that they both reiterate the same themes, addressing the most pressing topics. In the second issue of *Kultūros Barai*, the youngest city in Lithuania, called Elektrėnai (Electric City), is described in an elated tone:

In the middle of the year 1960 together with the building of the energy giant – Lithuania's national electrical plant, the foundation was laid for the residential area as well. At the end of that same year, new residents settled into the first buildings, and, after two more years, the construction of all the main city buildings was completed. That is why Elektrėnai is not just the youngest, but also the most rapidly built city in the republic. Today the city is already widely known: poets are dedicating their poems to it and composers their music. Even our country's architects, power specialists and other experts consider Elektrėnai to be the best and so far the only such city in all of the Soviet Union (Vaškevičius 1966: 18).

The article mentions a song – 'The Lights of Elektrėnai' (text Vytautas Bložė, music Eduardas Balsys), which sketches an image of a rising city:

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Mūs jaunystės svajonės ir viltys  
 Tįsta žemėje vario laidais,  
 Širdį jungs su širdim saulės tiltas,  
 Juo ir meilė, ir laimė ateis.  
 Elektrėnai, Elektrėnai – čia dainuos nau-  
 jakuriai,  
 Šviečia naktį, šviečia dieną Elektrėnų  
 žiburiai!

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The dreams and hopes of our youth  
 Stretch across earth like copper wires,  
 The sunny bridge will unite heart to heart,  
 Over it love and fortune will come.  
 Elektrėnai, Elektrėnai – the new settlers  
 will sing here,  
 Night and day the lights of city shine on!

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The tune of the song is in swing-style, and its most appealing details are an energetic rhythm, clear trumpet calls, enthusiastic voices of young men and women and a bright ending (like the evening glow of a distant city). It is a shame there was no video clip for this song, which probably would have been very youthful. It most likely would have reflected the contemporary hopes that soon every family would have a cozy apartment, and the life would be simple, good and beautiful.

### **The Wind Told Me Only Your Name**

Some of the songs created during the cultural and political 'thaw' seem not to have any of the usual Soviet attributes. One such example is the song, in a bossa nova style, titled 'The Wind Told Me Only Your Name' (text Stasys Žlibinas, music Teisutis Makačinas). The heroine of the song, a young girl, lives in her own dream world:

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Kaip pilka kregždutė padangėm nardau, Jai labai pavydžiu žydrių kelių. Vėjas man pasakė vien tavo vardą, Bet tavęs surasti aš negaliu. Skaidriom naktim klausiu savo ežerų, Sapnuos matau žiburius žarų, O kaip arti čia susirenka keliai, Kokie karšti saulės spinduliai.	Like a grey swallow I dive through the sky I envy its azure paths. The wind told me only your name But I cannot find you. On clear nights I ask my lakes, In dreams I see the glow of dawn, Oh how close the roads come together, How hot are the rays of the sun.
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The lyrics of the song are very poetic, the music marvelous, and the first frames of the video clip resemble a dream: with her arms spread like wings, a girl walks on the railing of a bridge. Later we see sunlight on the water's surface and sails – also not our everyday scenes, which appear as if in a day-dream or a movie. The images accompanying this song are associated not with work but rather with leisure. And what was leisure like in the 1960s? Without any doubt – a trip to the countryside and enjoyment of the sun's warmth, gentle breezes and the endless horizon of the sea.

Today it may seem that in nature's safe haven people could feel free, not

constricted by set rules and not watched by 'keen eyes'. Actually, however, the leisure of Soviet citizens was very regimented. In one essay analyzing the aesthetics of the 1960s Saulius Žukas writes:

The Soviet border military patrol allowed people to use only a short section of the coast(it was forbidden to go to the beach at night), and thus the concentration of people at the seaside resort was very large. Running away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life an individual would find himself again in a huge crowd where rules and regulations were strictly enforced, just as in other spheres of Soviet life (for example, brightly lit signs throughout the town proclaimed: 'Quiet. From this to that hour the city sleeps'). [...] People who came to the resort were protected from any kind of extreme experiences and were exceptionally socialized. The highlight of evening entertainment was watching the sun set into the sea, and this ritual attracted huge crowds of vacationers to the shore. Because there was little night life in cafes and restaurants (as mentioned earlier, they closed early and the families were on a limited budgets), this promenade where one could see and be seen became the culmination of a vacation day (Žukas 2004: 195).

In the 1969 video clip of the song 'The Wind Told Me' scenes of leisure are chosen as the setting: the singer walks along the rail of a bridge, and then sails through the waves on a yacht together with her friend, a bohemian-looking young man. Nonetheless, this scene conveying the feeling of freedom is deceptive, because freedom, as it turns out, was controlled. Thus the romantic girl seeking to simply flee to her dream world did not draw the censorship's attention. The heroine, in no way resembling Soviet women tractor drivers, construction workers or astronauts, could be justified from the perspective that after hard work, Soviet women had a right to pleasantly spend their free time, expressing their thoughts and feelings. (Once again, in this case the youthful flight of fancy and creativity did not overstep the boundaries of the system).

In the compilation of popular songs '50 Singing Memories' released by Lithuanian Radio and Television there is a variety of music video clips, however, scenes of newly constructed buildings and seascapes are especially frequent. The directors use these images over and over again until finally they become boring. In the video clip of 1977 'Come On a Date' the images of newly built homes are no longer portrayed optimistically, but instead appear melancholic. The singers walk arm in arm down a street, and later the cam-

era shows grey, monotonous houses, drably dressed people, an occasional automobile passing by... Ten years later the young couple no longer looks at life so optimistically. Unfortunately, the Soviet system couldn't and didn't offer them anything better than a standardized apartment.

This section tried to reveal the context in which these popular songs thrived and their connection with the reality and ideology of the 1960s. However, today these songs are remembered with nostalgia not because of these ideological concerns (which have consciously been downplayed and forgotten), but for other reasons: the youthful perspective on life, the lighthearted gaze toward the future and the catchy rhythms. Today's listeners do not care about 'the achievements of socialist labor', but the clear and unique music style of the sixties attracts them very much

### **In Front of the Blue Screen**

Now we will examine why the 'thaw' generation's music is so closely connected to television. Without a doubt, it is because swing-style songs as well as televised images are all part of that same generation's experience. The Vilnius television studio was established in 1957, and at first, programs were broadcast only 2–3 times per week for only two hours at a time. However, by the 1960s, information was already broadcast for eight hours every day. Watching TV after coming home from work became part of the daily routine. Analyzing the effect of the new media on its audience in the article 'Give Us More Images' the author writes with humor:

In our times, when polytechnic education is introduced in schools, when buying on credit is the new form of sales and everyday life is getting better, any Soviet citizen above the age of three can become a television watcher. [...] 'Frequent spectators' consider it their civic duty to turn on the television around 5 pm (in time for the program 'For You, Our Little Ones') and then not to turn it off until the terribly annoying 'slow-fox' comes on announcing that there really won't be anything more (Levinas 1965: 30).

Our companion guide to the 1960s, the journal *Kultūros Barai* often addresses the variety of television shows, their quality and educational pur-

poses. In 1967 a whole volume of the journal is dedicated to the theme of 'the blue screen'. The introductory article reports:

Today the blue screen is changing the family's daily rhythm by bringing into homes the pulse of reality as well as the romance of work and travel. It provides an irreplaceable forum for public figures of society and culture, theaters and musical collectives. In Soviet Lithuania alone there are about 300,000 television sets. [...] What does it give? What does it take away? How does this newfound miracle affect the individual of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? It is still too early to say. One thing is clear – the blue screen is a beacon of civilization and culture in our country, a window to the world situated somewhere between the door and cupboard that enriches people's spiritual lives (Pūras 167: 3).

In this special issue of the journal, the reader is encouraged to glance at what goes on in the television studios when the projector lights turn on and the announcers, guests, producers, sound and image technicians of programs take their places. The reader longs to see them from up close, hence the numerous illustrations in the journal. In the photographs we see announcers getting ready for their show, set decorators busy at work, high tech operators armed with their newest equipment. The tension and importance of the moment is felt everywhere. In the report, we see that many people contribute to the production of the TV program and that the television staff make up a huge collective.

This collective's production strongly influenced the taste of the 1960s TV spectator. The news and images emanating from the screen formed one's sense of style and defined a cultural outlook. Just as new domestic comforts installed in modern districts change the lives of Lithuanian city-dwellers, so too did television programs make their lives easier, cozier and more carefree.

### **Shine for Me Again**

So what happens when the viewer turns off the TV? Isn't it a shame that TV programs that so many people produced are as if lost? As with any group, so TV producers as well would like their work not to be short-lived but rather lasting and with its continuity strongly felt. It is not surprising that individ-



uals appear who want to browse around in archives and become interested in what was shown some decades ago.

We realize the value of archives when it comes to artists who for many years entertained the public, sang and acted for them, but have since left the stage and we can only see them on the screen. Then the fragments of their creative talents captured on film clips become extremely touching. Every detail of the archival recording is interesting: a talented singer's or actor's voice, a certain gaze, a smile, style of clothing, interior décor or outside landscape, even a hard to define 'aura' of the times. For many, such images conjure up not just an interest, but also nostalgia.

The first retro program was on TV3 channel – a musical project called 'Shine For Me Again' (2008), named after a popular song sung in the sixties by Stasys Povilaitis. The singer himself, who is still continuing his career, appeared on the program and on behalf of the producers invited many of the former popular singers to return to the stage and regain some of that former brilliance.

The initiative was further picked up by the Lithuanian National Television program 'Our Days Are Like a Holiday', named after a song by another popular singer, the legendary Vytautas Kernagis. The program remembered singers who have passed away, viewed archival clips and reminisced about them. In the studio, mention was made of the elderly singers' birthdays and their anniversaries, recounting their youthful years, first concerts, and all kinds of adventures on stage and behind the scenes.

The studio decorations include many details from the sixties: the program MC has a tie with polka-dots, in the corner stands a typical lamp from that period, a table, backup singers wearing hairdos, dresses and shoes of that era. However, the most 'retro' without any doubt was the sight of the old black and white screen on today's color TV. When the program MC announced 'Let's turn on the time machine', the viewer could see how the famous singer looked and sang some thirty or forty years ago.

We could observe the interaction between different generations by watching the program host talking to elderly guests such as the 80-year-old stage

director Galina Dauguvietytė, who recounted with pleasure how she created the first video clips and how she spent her first paychecks, and how the bohemians of those days spent their evenings.

These reminiscences are truly interesting because the 1960s press did not write much about songs and entertainment. During the 'thaw' years, the entertainment culture was just getting started and that is why there were no journalists who could write about it. Now there is much discussion about today's popular music on TV, radio, in the press and on the Internet. Yet while the music scene constantly needs new names, it also needs tradition. That is why the 'thaw' years are presented as the 'golden age' of popular music and the songs of that decade are described with epithets such as 'never ageing', 'the best', 'legendary', and 'golden'.

### **The 'Thaw' and the 'Freeze'**

Towards the end of this article it is important to ask why only swing and rock-n-roll type of songs have made a successful comeback, and why the later disco music generation does not seem to be so fascinated by the music of their youth?

In order to answer this question it will be helpful to consider the name for the later decade – 'the freeze'. As we know, from the mid-seventies until the mid-eighties, throughout all of the Soviet Union there was an economic and cultural 'freeze'. During that period many ideas of socialism became trite and overused. Even though the economic growth was obviously slowing down, the press, in its propaganda style, continued to write about the wonderful accomplishments of the soviet citizenry and how life was always improving. And the socialist artists continued to express the noble goals of the Soviet citizenry and to instruct them on how to be full-fledged citizens of the Soviet society. However, these often repeated slogans did not reflect the actual reality of life during that time. Life in the seventies and eighties was boring, even the rhythms of popular music were monotonous.

Certain feelings and sentiments which art historian Agnė Narušytė called

'the aesthetic of boredom' penetrated ordinary life and all the artistic spheres. According to the art historian, around the year 1980 a new photographic style emerged in which one could notice many signs of boredom.

The younger generation did not pay attention to the requirements set for Soviet photography: to illustrate and propagate the Soviet reality and to construct the model of Soviet history. Photographs of monotonous and bleak urban scenes and other objects meant that the young authors refused to create the optimistic image of a progressive society and even criticized the current situation. (Narušytė 2008: 17).

The once wide and modern yards around the new residential buildings began to be depicted by artists during the 'freeze' as non-functional, full of banal details: concrete columns, dying trees, broken benches, even playgrounds where children once played are now shown as abandoned and worn down. The well being of the Soviet system is no longer represented by the concrete blocks. Photographs in which the viewer's gaze hits a wall with no sense of depth signify a lack of freedom and openness. Even the TV does not bring joy to the bored individual of the 80s.

Instead of being a source of information, in a society that is hampered by ideology it becomes a piece of furniture, a detail of a banal interior (Narušytė 2008: 160).

An example of the above mentioned aesthetic in popular music is the song 'The Plumber from Ukmergė' (text by Juozas Erlickas, music Vytautas Kernagis). The theme at first seems pro-Soviet, but the chosen city does not stand out in any way; even the hero does not accomplish big projects, but only occupies himself with ordinary everyday repair jobs. The song allows us to understand that new impressions, exotic travels and exceptional leisure opportunities are not within reach of the ordinary Soviet citizen. It is not even worth dreaming about such things:

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Aš negaliu sugrįžti į Jamaiką, Nes niekuomet tenai ir nebuvau, Ir niekuomet žavioji juodaplaukė Į lūpas nebučiuos manęs karštai.	I can't go back to Jamaica Because I've never even been there And never will the dark-haired beauty Passionately kiss my lips.
Ir niekada tikrai aš nenuskęsiu Tų aksominių jos akių gelmėj, Kada saulėlydžiai raudoni gesta Nuostabiame mieste Montego Bay.	And never will I really drown In those velvet depths of her eyes, When the red sunsets fade In the marvelous city of Montego Bay.
Kodėl aš niekuomet tenai nebūsiu? Neklauskite apie tai, geriau neklauskite. Štai remontuoja kriauklės bei kranus aš Ir kartais į žemėlapij dairausi.	Why will I never be there? Don't ask me about that, better not to ask. Here as I fix sinks and faucets I sometimes glance at the map as well.
Montego Bay, Montego Bay... Santechniką aš dirbu Ukmergėj.	Montego Bay, Montego Bay... I work as a plumber in Ukmergė.

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The start of the song, 'I can't go back to Jamaica, because I've never even been there' is anti-nostalgic. Unfortunately, for the Lithuanian proletarian, Jamaica is only a dot on the map; you cannot stray anywhere far from the attentively guarded shores of the Baltic... The text of the song is ironic, tragicomic (the censorship let it pass as humorous, light-hearted). The music is also somehow strange, written in a tango rhythm that completely doesn't fit the context of entertainment music in the 1980s. This genre seems dated, no longer relevant, remaining somewhere only in the provinces. Indeed, even the music of the song treats the 'freeze' with irony as a period of stagnation, lacking in change and creative impulses, to which one does not want to return.

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**Illustrations**

Figure 4.1 *New Vilnius. Square in Lazdynai suburb. Photo by L. Ruikas, 1978*



Figure 4.2 *Singer Jonas Mašanauskas in the clip 'The roofs of Vilnius'. (Fifty Singing Memories 1957–2007)*



Figure 4.3 *Singer Danutė Neimontaitė in the clip 'The wind told me'. (Fifty Singing Memories 1957–2007)*





Figure 4.4 *Shock workers – positive heroes of Soviet times. Photo by Marius Baranauskas, 1986*

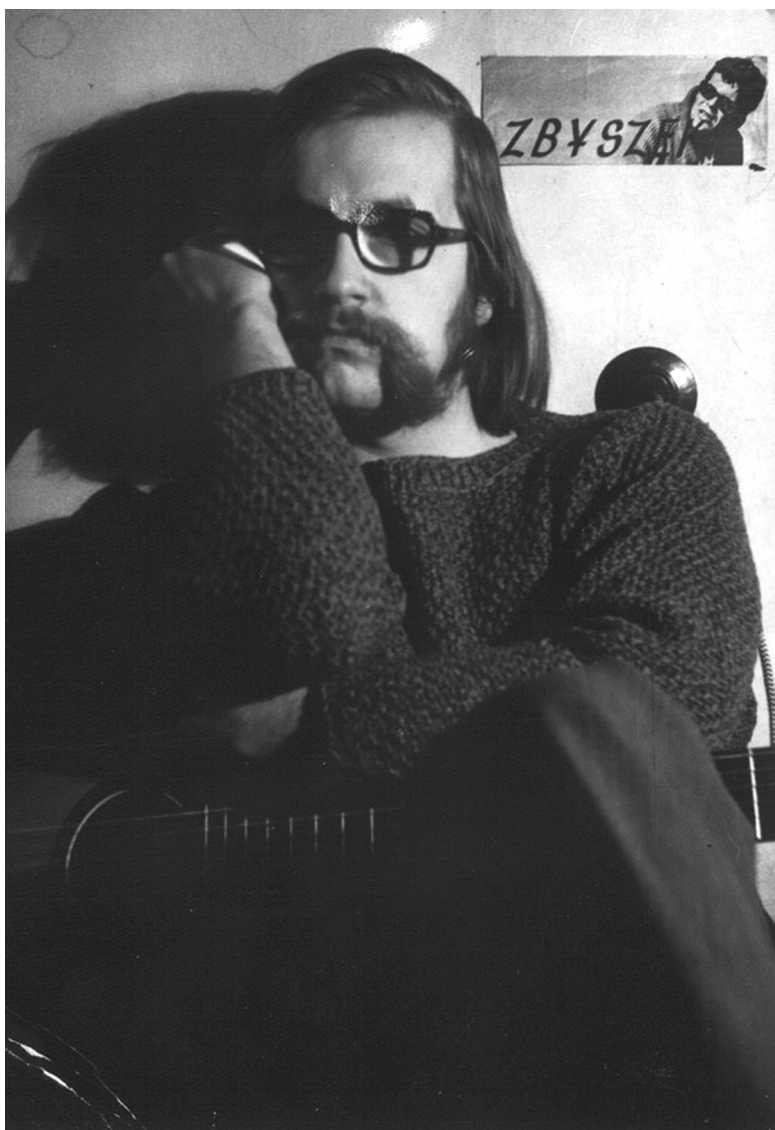


Figure 4.5 *Songwriter Vytautas Kernagis in 1975. Photo from the family archive.  
(A Book About Vytautas Kernagis)*