

POPULAR MUSIC IN RUSSIA

Guest editor: Mischa Gabowitsch (Berlin)

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RUSSIAN MUSICAL CULTURES IN FLUX

editorial

Like all other spheres of culture, musical life in the Soviet Union was tightly regulated. The classic distinction between serious and light music was officially abolished, since all musical forms, from opera to film scores, were made subservient to the officially decreed task of lifting people's patriotic spirit and the state-prescribed *joie de vivre*. This mission imposed a great deal of responsibility upon music professionals. Not only composers of symphonies or oratorios, but also those writing or singing songs for a mass audience needed to have a musical education and be a member of a professional union. This is how Soviet pop music functioned. Called *estrada* after the Russian word for 'concert stage', it produced short-lived hits, but also many first-class songs that have lost none of their popularity. Alongside the official music industry, however, Russian traditions and Western influence continually bred new popular genres that did not fit this narrow framework: prison or gangster songs, the songs of Russian singer-songwriters or 'bards', as well as Soviet versions of swing, jazz or rock music. As each of these styles was popular in its day, especially among the younger generation, they were partly integrated into the system in an elusive struggle for more effective control.

The abolition of censorship and the opening of the country since perestroika brought undreamt of opportunities for Russian musicians. They caught up with international music culture; they could freely record and publish their music; they could give concerts and develop new styles. The differentiation in existing varieties of popular music led to the emergence of new forms, from Russian blues via ethnic rock all the way to complex punk, rap and hip hop cultures. Every one of them now boasts a 'scene' with its own clubs and festivals, including the annual *KaZantip dance party* in Crimea, the *Ethnolife world music festival* that takes place every summer in two loca-

tions near Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the venerable *Grushin festival* on the banks of the Volga for lovers of 'bard' music.

But the new-found freedom has also been fraught with serious problems. The chronic lack of funds is aggravated by the widespread disregard for copyright. The collapse of the Soviet regime has plunged oppositional rock music and other genres into an identity crisis. And at the same time, most music lovers still have a conservative Soviet taste, which makes it hard for new talents and styles to win the recognition of a large public, especially since they also have to compete with Western pop music, which is now freely available. Finally, problems of distribution and concert organisation slow down the development of popular music. All this serves to intensify the tensions between artistic creativity and commercial success that haunt music cultures all over the world. In this issue, David MacFadyen and Anna Zaytseva show how pop and rock music respectively are dealing with these problems. Uli Hufen completes the picture with a take on the former state recording monopolist, *Melodiya*, and a look at the multi-faceted and hard-to-define genre of Russian *blatnyak* or gangster songs. The editors would also like to remind you of *kultura* 2/2005, which was partly devoted to youth musical scenes and DIY punk culture in Russia and the former Soviet Union.

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR OF THE PRESENT
ISSUE:

Mischa Gabowitsch is a sociologist, translator and editor. He specialises in the study of social reactions to extremist Russian nationalism since perestroika. From January 2003 to March 2006 he was editor-in-chief of the Moscow-based interdisciplinary debating journal *Nepriksonovenny Zapas* (*Emergency Ration*).

ROCK IN LENINGRAD/ST. PETERSBURG: LIFE BEFORE AND AFTER DEATH

Anna Zaytseva

analysis

Soviet rock music was distinguished by the primacy of the word. Leningrad bands especially were primarily appreciated for the poetic quality of their lyrics; their front men often became prophets to the fans. The nationwide fame perestroika bestowed upon rock bands was soon to fade. Today, the Russian rock scene is split. So-called Russian rock continues to stress the importance of lyrics, but critics accuse it of having sold out. In contrast, the Saint-Petersburg club scene strives to foster alternative styles that put an emphasis on instrumental music. However, there is only a small audience for such music. In order to ensure their survival, the clubs increasingly follow a commercial logic. Thus even here, less profitable bands find it difficult to establish themselves.

Critics and students of Russian rock have made a habit of pointing out the primacy of the word as its main characteristic feature: lyrics are more important in Russian than in Western rock. Since the 1990s, literary studies faculties have been producing scholarly works about 'the poetry of Russian rock in the context of Russian literature', and the year 2004 saw the publication of a two-volume gift edition entitled *Poets of Russian Rock*. Indeed, the legitimisation of rock in the USSR and its entry into the annals of Russian culture was based on the high poetic quality of the lyrics of *Mashina Vremeni* (Time Machine), *Aquarium*, *Zoopark* (Zoo), *Alisa*, *DDT* and others. Since the 1990s, however, new generations of musicians, who perform in clubs and preach a return to music, are distancing themselves precisely from this peculiar feature of Russian rock. This article deals with the genesis and basis of this cultural rift in the framework of the rock scene in Leningrad/St. Petersburg.

THE 1980S: THE MAKING OF A CANON

Clichés about Russians as the world's most literary nation aside, it is fair to assume that the primacy of the word in Soviet rock had to do with the inaccessibility of high-quality equipment: imported gear could only be found on the black market at high prices, and so musicians often used domestic or self-made musical appliances. The other reason was the small scale of concerts, many of which, especially after the persecution

of rock musicians intensified under Andropov and Chernenko, took place in apartments and unplugged. The Russification of musical forms went hand in hand with their simplification: from the late 1970s, covering Beatles songs or copying Led Zeppelin's 'cool solos' went out of fashion. ('With our equipment we'll never catch the Zeps' sound'.) The generational gap also played a part: many hippy heroes 'sold out' by starting to play the repertoire of Soviet composers in large concert halls, or were driven into the fangs of the underground concert business.

The Leningrad school of rock music is generally seen as having played a leading part in the development of 'rock poetry'. From 1981, it crystallised around the Leningrad Rock Club (LRC). The initiative was the rockers', and at some point the KGB gave them the go-ahead because they saw it as a wise means of control. The lyrics of the club's bands had to pass a 'lit(erary) check', i.e. get the approval of the club's artistic council. Musicians who publicly performed unapproved songs could be expelled from the club by their own fellow rockers. The concerts were semi-closed, since entry was by invitation, which the musicians gave out to their friends, rather than by ticket.

In the 1980s, a group of leaders formed around the LRC: *Aquarium*, *Zoopark*, *Alisa*, *DDT* and *Kino* (Cinema) built the foundations of the canon of the so-called New Wave, which combined British and New York New Wave music and post-punk with

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elements of the Russian bardic tradition. Thus in the lyrics of *Aquarium* alone connoisseurs have found quotes from David Bowie, Donovan, the Beatles, the Velvet Underground, T-Rex, reggae and the singer-songwriter Bulat Okudzhava. The lyrics of many New Wave bands contain elements of Russian symbolist poetry, Blok, Pushkin and the absurdist works of the Oberiu group.

The primacy of the word also manifested itself in underground recording: the sound of the Leningrad bands is characterised by predominant vocal parts and quiet rhythm sections. The father of this sound was Andrey Tropillo, who in the 1980s recorded albums of all the leading bands from Leningrad in his underground studio. Extensive magnitizdat-based underground distribution networks spread the canon of Leningrad rock to every part of the country, spawning imitators. And finally, the canonisation of the primacy of the word in Russian rock and the relegation of non-text-oriented bands to the margins of attention was completed by literati and journalists who were close to the rock scene and had access to

youth magazines and thick literary journals.

At the same time, there emerged an understanding of rock as a means of searching for truth, and of rock musicians as prophets. Both the bands' lyrics (especially in the case of *Aquarium*) and the mythology of the rock scene took up numerous elements of Eastern mysticism and fantasies about a psychedelic paradise. By the late 1980s, Boris Grebenshchikov (*Aquarium*) and Yury Shevchuk (*DDT*) openly declared that they saw rock as a path to God. The front men of many popular underground bands became something like gurus and fountains of truth for their fans. This search for truth could not take on an overtly political expression in the lyrics of LRC-controlled Leningrad rock. *Televizor*, one of the few bands who had the courage to perform an unapproved song at the club's festival, caused a major scandal, although it was not expelled from the club. The Leningrad rockers later openly distanced themselves from attempts to search for political messages in their lyrics. Thus Viktor Tsoy from *Kino*, one of whose songs has a line which says 'Our

AUTHORS' SONGS

Many varieties of popular music in contemporary Russia developed out of, or in opposition to, a singular genre that was in its prime in the 1960s: Russian authors' songs, also called amateur songs, bard music, sung poetry or guitar poetry. Each of these designations stresses an important aspect: in the Soviet Union, the common practice, even in light music, was for professional composers, working with professional poets, to write songs that were then performed in concert halls by professional singers, accompanied by professional musicians. By contrast, the singer-songwriters, often referred to as bards, sang self-written lyrics and accompanied themselves on the guitar, usually without having had any musical or vocal training. This made them similar to the US folk movement, French chansonniers like Jacques Brel or Georges Brassens, or German singer-songwriters. In two respects, however, they differed from all of these: firstly, many of the bards were outlawed, partially because of their aloofness from state-controlled music life, but above all because of the unpatriotic sentimentality of their lyrics, which often carried a dissident message. They therefore sang in private apartments or in the great outdoors. Secondly, the genre was even more popular than its Western equivalents: thanks to the spread of affordable tape recorders from the 1960s onwards, bootlegs – called *magnitizdat* (audiotape edition) in an allusion to the self-published *samizdat* literature – swept across the country

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hearts are demanding change', later declared that, contrary to popular opinion, it didn't contain any sensational anticipation of perestroika.

THE TEST OF PERESTROIKA

Despite its declared aloofness from politics, for the brief period of 1987-9, after rock emerged from underground, its stars did become 'figure-heads of the mass youth protest movement' thanks to the efforts of the perestroika-era mass media. The rockers filled stadiums; they were invited to popular show programmes. The perestroika gave rise to 'Soviet protest pop'; the lyrics became full of the schematic language of political posters, and some bands staged bizarre shows on the scene, making fun of Lenin, the revolution, the army and the bureaucrats. As soon as 'co-operatives' (early forms of private companies) were legalised in 1987, the moneymen of the illegal Soviet show business stepped out of the shadow and started getting rich on the former underground stars. But few rock stars could make a living from music (one of them was Grebenshchikov, who signed a contract with CBS to record an English-language album, 'Radio Silence'). There were still no new

labels, and all the state-owned monopolist *Melodiya* offered musicians were 30 copies out of a press run of 10,000. Andrey Tropillo, who became *Melodiya's* director, caring little about copyright, released all the albums he had previously produced in his underground studio. But this hardly caused protests, as many musicians were then euphoric about the very fact that their records sold in such numbers. At the end of perestroika, tape vending kiosks emerged everywhere, but they did not pay the musicians a kopeck in royalties.

The rock boom did not last long. The crisis that soon hit rock had an economic background, but it was also due to the musicians' sense that the new-found openness had stripped them of their monopoly on pronouncing the truth. By late 1989, there was a noticeable drop in stadium-filling rock concerts, and at the beginning of the 1990s the rock stars were crowded out by light disco bands. When perestroika's wave of revelations subsided and an economic crisis set in, the musicians' self-image as prophets and champions of ideas became irrelevant. Many bands split up; others didn't produce anything new from 1987 to the mid-1990s. Memoirists, critics and musicians

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with lightning speed, and tens of thousands of Soviet men and women got out guitars to sing the bards' tunes or write songs of their own. Even today, the songs of, for example, Vladimir Vyssotsky or Sergey and Tatyana Nikitin are among the few cultural references shared across social, educational and generational divides. The biggest gathering for lovers of the genre is the *Grushin Festival* that takes place every year near Samara. With over 100,000 participants annually, it is one of the world's biggest music festivals. Nevertheless, for most Russians, authors' songs belong to a bygone era: today's singer-songwriters are usually more professional than their predecessors and can perform and publish without restrictions, but most of them sing in small clubs or music theatres.

However, the bards' songs have acquired a special significance for the Russian-speaking community abroad, especially in Germany, Israel and the USA. For the former Soviet citizens who live far from their native lands, this genre, with its special emphasis on lyrics, is an important link with their home country. Thus well-known authors now regularly tour the whole world, and the festivals in Bloomsburg (Pennsylvania), Wuppertal or at the Sea of Galilee have become mass events in their own right.

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alike proclaimed the 'death of Russian rock'.

POPULAR ROCK MUSIC

Having been a community of equals when musicians were barred from professionalisation, in the 1990s rock acquired a pyramidal structure. At the top of the pyramid are rock stars who are integrated into show business, capable of competing with pop music and of filling huge concert halls like in the old days. The pyramid's foundation is formed by a club scene that has neither regular access to TV and radio broadcasts, nor contracts with record companies. The group at the top includes the leaders of the Leningrad school: *Aquarium*, *DDT* and *Alisa*. Grebenshchikov, who reissued a Golden Collection of Aquarium on CDs, was decorated with an order for 'services to the fatherland' on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Shevchuk in 1997–8 organised two large festivals to find new rock talents, organised a production centre called *DDT Theatre*, and received the title of People's Artist of Bashkortostan (his home region). Konstantin Kinchev (*Alisa*), who has recently been preaching a nationalistically

tainted Orthodoxy, became an idol for thousands of teenagers and was the first to create an official fan club.

The cultural legitimacy of the top groups is also illustrated by the fact that almost all commercial bands who play anything other than pop music of the traditional or Star Factory variety continue to emphasise the primacy of lyrics (albeit without the erstwhile claims to prophethood) and a light guitar sound with simple melodies. Surveys carried out by several FM radio stations have shown that this is what listeners who grew up with Russian rock expect. The results of these surveys served as a basis for the creation of Nashe radio (Our Radio), which broadcasts Russian rock of the old as well as lighter ('rockapops') varieties and has spun off numerous imitators. Fuzz magazine, the pioneer of rock journalism, has shifted to this format, which is also favoured by such well-known bands and performers as *Mummy Troll* ('Moomin'), *Zveri* ('The Animals'), *Tantsy Minus* ('Dances Minus'), *Bi-2*, *Spleen* and *Zemfira*.

THE CLUB SCENE VS. 'RUSSIAN ROCK'



Guitar-shaped stage of honour at the Grushin Festival (2004), <http://grushin.samara.ru>

At the bottom of the pyramid we find musicians who play in their spare time, performing in clubs and cafés. The club scene may be called a 'semi-voluntary economic underground'. For the musicians, performing in St. Petersburg clubs is the main way of gaining recognition, but it does not generate any revenue (some St. Petersburg clubs remunerate little-known groups with a few bottles of

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beer, while well-known ones go to Moscow to earn a little money). Groups which are ready for an album produce records in a DIY fashion or with small labels – which, at least until recently, survived by distributing pirated CDs by Western rock bands.

The scene's spokespeople routinely point out the weakness of intermediary infrastructures in Russia, in-between pure DIY and show business. This is accompanied by a myth about the blossoming of indie rock in the West: in the West, it is said, there are indie labels that do not enslave musicians with multi-year contracts, small concert halls open to music that does not fit conventional genres, a knowledgeable audience and hundreds of indie bands in every little town, touring the country in their own vans.

The founder of St. Petersburg's first independent club *TaMtAm*, Seva Gakkel, Aquarium's former cellist, was inspired by the example of US indie clubs that he had visited during a tour. He says he was chiefly struck by the fact that abroad, 'you can just walk into a small club and listen to genuine blues, highly interesting avant-garde jazz or Irish folk. And I understood [...] that you can just live with music, that it can be an everyday thing.' Gakkel concentrated on unknown bands that had escaped the influence of the canonised groups of his generation. His club hosted a broad variety of music (rockabilly, indie pop, punk, hardcore). Out of this 'TaMtAm generation' emerged some bands, such as *Tequillajazz* and *Markscheider Kunst*, who later made it onto the airwaves

and into commercial concert venues. The club existed from 1991 to 1996 when, after numerous police raids, its premises were taken over by a commercial company.

Later clubs emulated *TaMtAm*'s way of functioning and shared its fate. The mid-1990s were the heyday of clubs founded by rock-n-roll enthusiasts: they used voluntary labour, cultivated a homely atmosphere, drew a hard core of Bohemian regulars and carried out an educating and pioneering mission. To varying degrees, all of this applied to *Wild Side* (founded in 1993), *Ten Club*, *Fish Fabrique* and *Art-klinika* (1994), *Gora* (1995), *Poligon* (1995) and *Moloko* (1997). Given the rich variety of music on offer, the clubs began to specialise in certain formats. However, it was rare for these to be openly defined in stylistic terms; they served instead as implicit selection criteria based on the tastes of each club's artistic director and regulars. Thus the musicians often characterise themselves not by styles but by club



Konstantin Kinchev of the rock group Alisa at the Leningrad Rock-Club (1985), Photo: unknown

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affiliation (e.g. 'a *Moloko*-style band').

The clubs have also made attempts to reach out to a larger public. *Wild Side*, for example, organised free annual open-air festivals called *Rock Side*, with a sea of beer and concerts of bands aligned with the club. Nevertheless, it is rather rare for club directors to promote their bands and get them invited to big rock festivals – one reason being that these festivals use the time-tested format of 'Russian rock', expecting to make money with the big names. One possible exception is St. Petersburg's annual *Sergey Kuryokhin International Festival* (SKIF) held in memory of the eminent avant-garde musician who, in his experimental project *Popular Mechanics*, brought together musicians belonging to entirely different styles, from punk to jazz and even a military orchestra.

Thus the St. Petersburg club scene developed in opposition to 'Russian rock', which had become synonymous with an archaic musical style and pathos-laden lyrics, and occupied the cosy niche of commercial rock music. Even greater disdain is felt for younger musicians who follow the canon of 'Russian rock'. The main feature of the club scene is a penchant for musical innovation. And if Shevchuk asks the audience at his concerts 'Can you hear the lyrics?', in a club, when someone says 'We can't hear the lyrics!', the musicians may well reply, 'You're not supposed to!'. In extreme cases the voice is treated like a musical instrument, and the lyrics are deliberately absurd or sung in foreign or invented languages. Finally, the stylistic diversity of St. Petersburg club bands contrasts not only with 'Russian rock', but also with 'Western' musical cultures such as punk or metal, which the Bohemian scene considers excessively 'herd-like' and having little to do with music.

In 1997, many first-generation clubs closed, some of them because commercial organisations laid claim to their premises. Ever since, many of the

surviving clubs have led a fragile existence on the verge of closure and often have had to move. In conflicts between clubs and businessmen, local authorities invariably support the latter. Thus St. Petersburg's State Property Committee didn't extend the *Moloko* club's rental contract despite numerous notes of protest from St. Petersburg musicians, including well-known rock stars. After 1998, clubs of a new, commercially oriented type come to the fore. Their artistic directors value musical professionalism and strive for an entertaining programme that might draw a wealthier and larger audience. This desire is expressed in the rise of admission fees and drinks prices as well as the organisation of space inside the clubs: the bar is now in the same room as the stage, and significant funds are spent on interior design and media ads. Rock concerts are followed by parties with DJs.

The current club scene is, as it were, an incomplete alternative to commercial rock. It is incomplete in that it partially reproduces the commercial logic on a smaller scale and contributes to the emergence of a spirit of competition – for symbolic recognition if not money – among the musicians. The profit imperative has led many clubs to classify bands by their crowd-pulling potential: less popular groups are scheduled to perform on workdays and as supporting acts, while the 'stars' of the underground get full-length gigs on weekends. The commercial logic is also reproduced in the World Wide Web. Thus the St. Petersburg club scene's biggest web site, www.spbclub.ru, not only charges fees to publish announcements of musical events on its front page, but also regularly rates musicians by popularity (e.g. 'The best band of the St. Petersburg spring').

The musicians themselves are pessimistic about the perspectives of indie rock in Russia. Their situation may be described as a difficult balancing act between a yearning for broad popularity and a

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sense of its impossibility that they compensate by stressing their incorruptibility. This ambivalence is expressed in a pronouncedly cynical, 'unserious' discourse and self-designations as 'losers' – a peculiar self-ironic equivalent of the 'accursed poet'. The instability of this situation may be the reason why the few musicians who *are* noticed by a growing show business have no qualms about leaving the underground club scene. Others, on the contrary, tend towards the pole of determined and politicised Do It Yourself. (See the article by Olga Aksyutina in *kultura* No. 2/2005.)

*Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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Anna Zaytseva (born 1978) is a doctoral student at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. Research interests include the sociology

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BACK TO THE FUTURE: ON THE REBIRTH OF RUSSIAN GANGSTER SONGS

Uli Hufen

portrait

In the autumn of 2001, a strange CD appeared in Russian record stalls. The cover of *Yeshcho raz o chorte* ('One more time about the devil') featured a golden, hellfire-lit devil about to pour a drink down a recumbent man's throat. The CD's subtitle was 'The Best of Soviet Restaurant Music 1975–76'. However, the musicians shown on the back cover looked contemporary, and the pseudonym of the beautiful man in the middle was not unknown to Moscow buyers: Count Hortitsa. Wasn't that the chap who had been putting on that crazy music show called 'Troubling Transsylvania' on Radio 101 for several years?

Yeshcho raz o chorte included 15 songs from the 1960s and 70s. Songs that everyone knew although they were not played on the radio or pressed on vinyl. Some people call these songs

blatnyak, others *Rusky shanson* (Russian chanson). The genre is hard to circumscribe or define unambiguously. But one thing is clear: its roots go back decades, into the 19th century. In the 1920s and early 30s it went through a renaissance; even Stalin was a fan of songs such as *Gop-so-smykom* (roughly 'High-spirited hop'), which made the singer Leonid Utyosov famous. Nevertheless, in the mid-1930s, such songs vanished from Soviet cultural life. From the 60s onwards, underground producers like Rudolf Fuks in Leningrad or Stas Yeruslanov in Odessa and singers such as Kostya Belyayev or Igor Erenburg revived the genre. Many of their songs were set among crooks or thieves, but there were also humorous songs, street songs, love songs and many more. The genre is united by its subversive humour and an un-

portrait

compromising disdain for any official authority. The classic *Moy priyatel student* ('My friend the student') by Igor Erenburg is a perfect example; it has been part of Kostya Belyayev's repertoire for decades and is also sung by Count Hortitsa (whose real name is Garik Ossipov) on *Yeshcho raz o chorte*. The song is about a small-time crook whose friend the student forges passes of the OBKhSS – the Soviet authority charged with fighting corruption and theft of public property. Armed with the pass, the hero of the song proceeds straight to a manager at the showcase department store GUM. The manager is terribly afraid of controls because he illegally turns his privileged access to scarce imported goods into cash, which he uses to build a dacha. Thus our hero finds it easy to extort a smart Finnish suit and other fashionable clothes from the frightened manager. When he steps onto the street in his new things, Moscow's prettiest girls run after him open-mouthed.

Obviously, such anarchist songs and their creators had a sceptical view of the state and its officials. In that respect, little has changed under Yeltsin and Putin, as Sergey Shnurov had to learn the hard way. With his band, *Leningrad*, Shnurov is currently Russia's number one rock star. *Leningrad's* Moscow concerts were cancelled by the authorities, and various provincial bigwigs have also made it clear that Shnurov is not welcome in their cities. Estonia refused to grant him a visa. All because of Shnurov's electrified *blat* chansons: 'The whole thing came entirely intuitively – we had a certain idea of *blatnyak* based on Vyssotsky songs we were all listening to. But we didn't know anything about Arkady Severny, [the gypsy singer] Alyosha Dmitrievich or the Pearl Brothers [a *blatnyak* band founded in 1974]. Then people with tapes came along, saying "Just listen to this, we're sure you'll like it" – and we did.' Having recorded several CDs with his band, in

2003 Sergey Shnurov published an acoustic solo album called *Vtoroy Magadansky* ('The second concert in Magadan'), imbued with the spirit of the 1970s. 'Today the dominant thing are *blat* chansons recorded using electronic instruments. I wanted to show that true *blatnyak* is different. It was played in restaurants by live musicians. I wanted to show that's still possible. *Blatnyak* with electronic instruments is like playing country music on Yamaha keyboards. It's ridiculous and stupid, and it's not in line with tradition.'

And that, ultimately, is what the renaissance of Russian chanson is about: traditions, the cultivation and cautious modernisation of the musical heritage. For many years after perestroika, the Russian market was dominated by American pop culture; now people in Moscow and St. Petersburg are realising that the country has rich traditions of its own. Garik Ossipov and Sergey Shnurov, but also singers such as Psoy Korolenko or Alexey Kortnev, have understood that these traditions are relevant and fruitful. They have proven this with their CDs released in the fantastic series *Non-Legends of Russian Chanson*.

*Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Uli Hufen (born 1969) is a freelance writer and journalist. In 1990–7 he studied Slavic Studies and East European History in Cologne and St. Petersburg.

LISTENING SUGGESTION:

In April of 2006, Eastblok Music in Berlin released the first record of Leningrad to be published in Western Europe (*Chleb*). Sergey Shnurov's *Vtoroy Magadansky* is included with the first edition as a limited-edition bonus CD.

RUSSIAN POP MUSIC TODAY: THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

David MacFadyen

analysis

Russian popular music has changed a great deal since the 1990s, and continues to do so. A Soviet musical education is no longer important for the innumerable booking agencies that have replaced centralised systems, but access to television is a prerequisite for a successful career as a pop star. That, however, is restricted to a few – mostly Soviet-era – stars. More and more songwriters and musicians therefore use the World Wide Web to make their works available for download – out of enthusiasm or to earn money. The development and spread of modern technologies such as mobile phones with a large downloading capacity is likely to lead to a diversification in the music offered and democratise access to popular music.

Russian popular music has changed a great deal since the 1990s, and continues to do so. Explaining these changes, however, can often be difficult, since ‘popularity’ might be defined in terms of general enthusiasm, unit sales or radio playlists, and today’s relationship between Russian mass media and public desire is far from simple. Were one to examine pop music in that nation simply by monitoring TV and radio broadcasts, several things would appear to be self-evident. Rock music is no longer an effective or respected vehicle of social protest, and the world is full of studio-sponsored ‘pop projects’ that hardly differ from Western boy- and girl-bands. Nationwide broadcasts support little other than ageing Soviet singers or callous attempts to milk teenage pockets. If we dig a little deeper, however, the workings of both nostalgic and bubblegum markets hide a greater complexity, one revealed to a large degree by provincial, web-based song writing all the way from the Baltic to the Pacific. The people who like music and the people who actually make it are very different from each other.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, popular sung narratives have struggled to survive in glutinous markets. Several ensembles abused TV’s ignorance of who they were, while other artists were themselves abused in an identical fashion: multiple touring artistes would pretend to be the same ensemble, using the thumping synth-pop of *Mirazh* (‘Mirage’), for example, or the limp elec-

tronic melodies of (actual) orphans *Laskovy* may (‘Tender May’). The lip-synching of disco divas *Kombinatsiya* (and many others) did little to separate the greedy from the gifted, creating certain dilemmas that remain in place today, when no singular ideology underwrites song writing.

Even now, bogus bands can tour the provinces, hoodwinking gullible audiences for months; people simply have too little experience of the ‘outside’ world. Russia’s enduring failure at the Eurovision Song Contest shows the related difficulties of creating lyrical relevance beyond domestic borders, too, especially because the selection of national representatives is patently rigged. Only the faux-lesbian, club-oriented aesthetic of *Tatu* and the lush ballads of *Alsu* have filled primetime TV and theatres at home and abroad.

A Soviet musical education no longer matters to innumerable booking agencies that have replaced centralised systems. Each and every backwater needs to be managed on its own terms, a dilemma that certainly persisted in localised bribery before 1991, but the idea of ‘nationwide touring’ today can be a terrifying grab-bag of isolated negotiations. Making music videos in order to overcome cruel geography will cost \$15–100,000 each time – plus \$20,000 for promos and payola.

Yet MTV-Russia has an ‘unspoken agreement’ with the *Russkaya Mediagruppa* holding and its massive radio stations (*Russkoye radio*, *Radio Maximum*, *Hit-FM*, and *Radio Monte Carlo*): if

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your song does not play on its airwaves, it won't reach MTV, purportedly the only channel that does not accept bribes. An enormous country hides an enormous number of problems.

OLD VOICES ON TV

As a consequence, perhaps, Sofiya Rotaru and Alla Pugacheva remain the most popular female singers in Russia, though both are close to retirement. These two women embody styles of several decades ago (the grandly orchestrated pomp of the 1970s), but have managed with enviable success to maintain a cultural pre-eminence. The list of most popular male singers displays even less fashion than the ladies: the operatic, very blonde Nikolai Baskov, the Brezhnevian staple Lev Leshchenko, and the patriotic favourites of Moscow's mayor: middle-aged pin-up Oleg Gazmanov and the mock-militaristic sing-alongs of portly Nikolai Rastorguyev. These sad rankings come from a national survey of late 2005, offering a snapshot of what everybody likes.

The problem is, however, that not everybody *buys* music or contributes perceptibly to its development. Rotaru's biggest fan base is in the rural South and her typical admirer is female, between 45 and 59 years of age. Baskov's fans are even older: 31% of pensioners rank him as number one, as opposed to only 10% of students. Baskov *et al.* thus distinguish themselves from the marginally hipper artists ranked highest in Moscow: Valeriya, Zhanna Friske and Dmitry Bilan. Valeriya claims (along with jazz singer Larisa Dolina) to be the 'Voice of Russia' and her classically trained lungs are indeed impressive when harnessed to melodies commissioned by her influential producer-husband. Friske left one of the biggest girl-bands

of Yeltsin's term (*Blestyashchie*, 'The Shining Ones') in order to forge a vaguely trendy, if not bland aesthetic, whilst Bilan* is a corporately manufactured pin-up for pre-teen girls.

Leshchenko, Gazmanov, and elder comperes like comedian Vladimir Vinokur populate primetime TV by swapping spots at their jubilee concerts, nurturing a self-perpetuating 'fame' milked in turn by corporate sponsors who will pay \$150,000 to subsidise one such event on Russia's main TV stations. The audience share of these concerts, claim curmudgeons, may be 'absolute zero', but their persistence in evening line-ups is evidently charming middle-aged ladies from the provinces.

This issue of age and gender is extremely important, because 72% of concert-goers and music buyers are female with an average age of twenty-seven, a demographic the music critic Artemy



Alla Pugacheva during a guest appearance on the „Star Factory“ show (2004), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Allapugacheva.jpg>

* Dima Bilan made the second place in the Eurovision Song Contest on 20 May 2006 in Athens with „Never Let You Go.“

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Troitsky defined in his recent lectures at Moscow State University as ‘girls who don’t know how to earn money..., a demographic unable of holding a bank account’.

Television creates famous singers, but it reflects neither the active acquisition (buying, recording, downloading) of songs nor (quantitatively speaking) their creation. The impossibility of being seen means that tiny, private and lyrical tales are often handed over to self-deprecation. Grey-haired, ex-MTV presenter Vassily Strelnikov recently recalled the text of Russia’s first little podcast. Unseen in the Moscow media for several years, his voice returned from the lonely edges of the map: ‘Hello, kids. I’m Vassily Strelnikov. I’m alive and well, on my pension and living in the forest!’ Forty-something VJs spend as much time mocking their own digital diaries as composing them.

CAN THE RUNET SAVE POP MUSIC?

The most notorious place where music-lovers have attempted to get serious and cast off the shackles of cash is the site *AllofMP3.com*, which the IFPI (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) has deemed ‘unlawful both inside and outside Russia’. Moscow’s courts continue to frustrate any serious attempts at curtailing its business practices. The number of free-music locations offering Western, pirated recordings across the Russian internet (or *runet*) has, however, reduced dramatically in the past few years, whereas those offering independent, legal and lesser-known domestic ensembles has increased. The relationship between these two movements of Western product (downwards) and Russian (upwards) is often expressed ethically. One writer for the influential site *Electrosound.ru* compared the actions of illegal web hosts or portals to a profiteering butcher. ‘Cows in the meadow may fill him with thoughts of yummy milk or the

beauty of Russian nature, but at work he electroshocks them to death, picking grown-up heifers to provide his customers with meat.’ Music needs a community of care, or so we are told.

Over and above the endless number of sites created by and dedicated to one performer, the first step towards organised, caring activity often takes place in the form of ‘clubs’ or amateur online societies, caused by dissatisfaction with the woeful limitations of free (i.e., slow) hosts such as *Narod.ru*. Resulting expressions of shared, corrective effort draw upon the *perestroika* idioms of teamwork that so often leaked into late Soviet song writing. ‘We’d like to keep our site constantly changing and to develop some interesting ideas with you, because it’s... Music That Keeps Us Together!’ Many such invitations, however, garner no more than a couple of responses, even when they adopt names of inclusive unity (like *Posse.ru* [‘the gang’]). Nobody really cares that much. Fussier sites try attracting traffic with other terms of friendship, such as *Kladovaya zvezd* (‘Star Storeroom’), whose hopeful name invokes the dizzy heights of *Fabrika zvezd* (‘Star Factory’), the nationwide TV talent show more than redolent of *American Idol*. Sadly, the *Fabrika* actually ‘makes’ stars, whereas the *Kladovaya* is where performers languish, hoping to be unearthed. The latter site asks that posted songs embody some ‘self-expression (so you can tell it’s done “from the heart”, not just for commercial reasons or from personal ambition)’.

This avoidance of commercial yearning, however, is contradicted whenever ‘club sites’ arrange competitions named after other television pop shows (like *Zolotoy mikrofon* [‘Golden Microphone’]) that offer little defence from bands who vote for themselves – over and over. Even amateur portals like *Artefakt*, designed to save us from pop’s covetous predictability, give legal advice to the more promising acts and happily promote the voices of

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future TV or radio presenters.

DOWNLOADS AND PROMOS

The largest and most important portal is *Real Music.ru*, recently the recipient of a UNESCO grant in order to organise its holdings of over 116,000 works by 27,000 performers. The nearest competitor in terms of size is *Music.lib.ru*, currently hosting 67,000 songs by 11,000 bands and countless genres, though it offers no direct links to other sites and rarely encourages voter endorsement or contests. *RealMusic* was formed on 27 May 2001, and within two years its holdings had been first assessed and then gently refashioned by 45,000 listener comments and 15,000 observations on in-house forums.

The portal now claims that it exists, first and foremost, to help non-Moscow bands reach ears of consequence *within* Moscow. Of late the most indicative competition herein has been *Barkhatnoe podpolye* ('Velvet Underground'), via which it hopes to discover the most promising artistes who embody a refined, decadent air in contemporary song writing. Today's decadents, as before,

are often those little people who feel sidelined – and so they nurture their 'malaise'.

Alternative forms of cohesion draw upon regional differences. Some portals, for example *Zvuk-vokrug.ru* ('Soundaround') in Bashkortostan or *Art Colony* (www.murawey.tver.ru) in Tver, are keen to host the widest range of genres possible, but other towns and distant regions showcase themselves much more narrowly. Song-portals in Surgut and Vladivostok try to host local musicians, announce forthcoming events and advertise the local club scene, together with photographs of each party or performance thereafter. The listings of Samara and Bratsk are full of thrash or death-metal; Krasnodar's *MuzZone.yuga.ru* even defines itself entirely by means of negation, endorsing little, but lambasting and rejecting all 'commercial pop, hip-hop or *chanson*'.

Now, as in the late 1980s, rock's grimness tries to remain a defence against tawdry pop (*popsa*), or what the Volgograd portal *Nibumbum* (www.nibumbum.boom.ru) calls the next generation of cookie-cutter boy-bands like *Ivanushki International*: 'Indushki Incorporated'. Kaliningrad and

GORBUSHKA – MUSIC MARKET AND HAVEN FOR PIRATES

The *Gorbushka* (literally 'bread heel') is a huge music and consumer electronics market in the Western part of Moscow. The name derives from the Gorbunov House of Culture that originally belonged to Aircraft Factory No. 22 and was named after its director. From the 1960s, it hosted singer-songwriter recitals and, from the early 1970s, rock concerts. Towards the beginning of the 1980s, music lovers began spontaneously exchanging albums in the building's foyer. By the early 1990s, their weekly meetings had expanded into an enormous open-air market for records, videos and software. Before the spread of the Internet, the *Gorbushka*, and with it countless smaller offshoots across the country, was virtually the only place where music aficionados could find Russian and foreign records to meet even the most outlandish listening tastes.

After several attempts, the city administration finally shut down the *Gorbushka* in December 2002. The reason was simple: up to half of the records sold were pirated. But a few months later, the *Gorbushka* emerged in new garb, this time within the nearby premises of the Rubin TV factory. Music vendors now have to share the over 30,000 square metres with shops selling PCs and household appliances. But despite all efforts to control them, this sea of sales booths is still brimming with pirates – to the distress of the music industry and the authors, but to the delight of penniless music lovers.

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Vladivostok have forged the best, most positive paths between hit radio and amateurism, the latter city still riding a wave of modish attention after the success of London-produced, contemporary rock-darlings *Mummy Troll* ('Moomin').

A shift from hedonistic amateurism is most evident among dance portals, where DJs house remixes, mash-ups or extended sets as long-term advertising for short-term club work. One such dance resource in Tver (*Tverevolution.ru*), for example, handles local bookings for all the performers whose tracks and mixes it hosts. The resulting competition between transience (or novelty) and necessarily permanent promotion leads sites like *Mp3.exnet.su* to naively request that visitors destroy any downloaded tracks within 24 hours. Other portals (such as *DeLIT.net*) offer only limited downloads after registration, or FTP access only to ISPs within the Russian Federation, again underscoring their key market, willy-nilly, as domestic.

The undoubted leader in this sphere is *PromoDJ.ru*, which recently replaced the erstwhile *DJ.ru*, a domain less than welcoming for Western visitors. Although designed to avoid massed, indiscriminate trawling with programs such as ReGet, *PromoDJ* does allow one-click/one-track access to the largest selection of house, ambient, techno, progressive and minimal works on the *runet* today. Lengthy promo or live mixes aside, their ever-changing archive of new, one-track demos regularly numbers over 2,000.

But who can download all this? Estimates suggest that perhaps 75% of *RealMusic*'s users have modest dial-up at home, another problem they are very keen to overcome, since for all the site's assurances that it is not directly involved in A&R (artists & repertoire), *RealMusic*'s administrators hold that its new, 2006 version will allow artists to get some royalties (or so-called 'awards' – no matter how small). This, says the admin, would

permit the site to sidestep any inaccessibility of its archive for modem-based users and simply release CD-based collections. Thus the most successful artists 'could be advanced into the international market', i.e., get on TV.

MUSIC ON MOBILES

Television has resurrected the careers of pop stars like the falsetto heartthrob of the early 90s, Vladimir Presnyakov, whose concert bookings increased almost ten-fold (and his income forty-fold) after he won the Russian version of US reality show *Survivor* (*Posledny geroy* ['The last hero']). If fledgling musicians cannot be seen, they might be heard, yet only in Moscow do more than 50% of web users have access to fast, non-modem connections that make downloading new songs feasible.

Mobile phones could slowly reduce this disparity between centre and periphery once common access to sound files moves beyond 10-second ringtones. In Moscow, not surprisingly, 72% of the populace uses a mobile phone, but Siberia is close behind at 66%, as are the Urals at 51%.

These cheering figures might allow us to correct the considerable asymmetry in rural and middle-aged voters who currently define notions of pop's actual, *discernible* popularity. The discrepancy between male and female phone owners is only 7%; among web-users it is more, at 10%. In addition, 88% of young people own mobiles, as opposed to only 20% of pensioners. These issues of distributional fairness or financial chaos are already part and parcel of on-line song writing in the world's largest piracy market after China. Russia, after all, produces much more audio-visual material than its own market can possibly absorb, dumping illegal output on at least 27 countries around the world.

As the format of music-only television falters in the US, however, and funded, corporate con-

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certs on Russia's 'Channel One' cannot last forever with 'zero' ratings, we can only hope that truly nationwide, affordable and portable media like mobile phones will soon allow song writing (whether seen or simply heard) both to bypass the endless slippage of portals into businesses and to send different, independent music into the ears of ageing southern ladies.

For all the romance of this future scenario, however, there remains one troubling question: what would prompt a fan of Rotaru or Pugacheva to download something different in the first place? The stubborn insistence in today's media upon a free, already-familiar and essentially visual presentation of pop music may be so well entrenched that nostalgia will still fashion public taste, even when the profits dry up. Such is the logic of Putinesque culture, at least until 2008.

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MELODIES FOR MILLIONS

Uli Hufen

portrait

On a grey winter's day in early 2005, technical staff at the Moscow record company *Melodiya* made a strange discovery. In a dusty archival box they found a tape which obviously did not match its label. The label read, in beautiful Sovietese: 'Concert of the participants of the All-Russian rural amateur art talent competition. Third record'. Working with a few old *Melodiya* hands, the company's artistic director, Andrey Troshin,

quickly found out that they had chanced upon something very special, documenting a unique moment in the history of *Melodiya*. What they had found was a record of the album 'La Musique Soviétique. From Palanga to Gurzuv. L'été 1969', long considered lost. Soviet beach music that was meant to lure tourists to the Baltic and Black Sea coasts.

According to Andrey Troshin '1969 was the last

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year when *Melodiya* produced pop music records of an international quality. Up to and including 1969, Soviet *estrada* wasn't any worse than its Western equivalent, perhaps even better, including the compositions. It was professional; it was unusual; it had its own style. Then came 1970 and the 100th anniversary of the birth of the state's founder, Lenin. The anniversary did little for tourism, but it did have an effect on the programme of state-owned *Melodiya*. 'From Palanga to Gurzuv' was never pressed.

Thirty-five years later, in the summer of 2005, when the album finally saw the light of day, Russians were amazed. Had there really been such music in the Soviet Union? Produced by *Melodiya*, the state monopolist?

When *Melodiya* was founded in 1964, this meant a merger of all record studios that existed at the time: of all independent labels, all pressing plants and the entire distribution network. Labels based in Moscow and Leningrad, the Baltic republics, Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Caucasus and Central Asia were all bound together. At the time, *Melodiya* was the world's biggest label. Of course, its programme included classical music, featuring world-renowned stars such as Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels or Mstislav Rostropovich, as well as the great Soviet orchestras. But the company also produced folk music from around the world, the speeches of Communist party bosses – and, of course, Soviet pop music.

When, towards the late 1980s, the Soviet Union was staggering towards its demise, it became clear that *Melodiya*, too, would go down with it. But even the biggest pessimists couldn't imagine how bad things would get. As Andrey Troshin put it: 'In 1991, *Melodiya* began to disintegrate, like all Soviet institutions of this size, just like the state as a whole. And a lot of bad guys from the West took advantage of this situation. [...] They

were afraid *Melodiya* would dump cheap products on the whole world, especially in the area of classical music. Therefore they wanted to keep us away from the global market and exploit *Melodiya*'s archives themselves. In 1991, destroying this organisation wasn't a problem, and that is exactly what happened. For 12 years, *Melodiya* disappeared inside BMG and was considered one of that company's labels.'

In Moscow, meanwhile, things were going haywire, like in a bad movie. Pirate firms were publishing *Melodiya* records without paying a kopeck, the studios were decaying, and *Melodiya*'s amazingly corrupt management was selling everything that was not nailed down to the highest foreign bidders. Even *Melodiya*'s card index was systematically destroyed in order to cover the tracks.

Then, two years ago, the miracle hardly anyone was expecting happened: after twelve years of selling-off and barbarianism, after more than a decade of the systematic destruction of a whole country's musical heritage, *Melodiya* became independent again, with a new, committed management. For a year and a half, new *Melodiya* CDs have been coming out, mostly unpublished or long-forgotten treasures from its huge archives. Mahler symphonies directed by the legendary Kirill Kondrashin, Beethoven sonatas played by Maria Grinberg or symphonies by the Soviet composer Nikolai Myaskovsky, which recently won *Melodiya* awards in Western Europe. And, just like 30 years ago, pearls of Soviet pop music in the series *The true history of Russian light music*.

After a 15 year interval, *Melodiya* is also, very cautiously, beginning to record new albums: jazz from the former Soviet republics, but also modern classical music – cautiously, because recording is expensive and buyers are few and far between.

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In 2006, although *Melodiya* is still a state-owned enterprise, it is no longer a global company with customers in 100 countries.

*Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch*

LISTENING SUGGESTIONS

Melodiya's web site (www.melody.su) includes an English-language selection from its catalogue. It

also features a list of foreign shops that sell some of its records (<http://www.melody.su/eng/shops.php>). However, they mostly store classical music. Soviet and Russian pop music is still hard to obtain through the major outlets and is best ordered through Russian shops abroad, including web-based mail order companies, e.g. <http://www.russianbeat.com/>, <http://www.sverdlovstore.com/> or <http://www.russiancd.com/>.