

Back [into the] Underground: Russian Rock'n'roll Community: In Search of New Adversaries and Identities  
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I will dedicate these pages to the Russian rock'n'roll music phenomenon and the social and cultural transformations this medium lived through in the last ten years. I will preface my account of its present condition by a comprehensive historical and slightly theoretical explication that should make clear from what and into what this cultural phenomenon transformed. First of all I would like to establish three main points about Russian rock music, which basically summarize my view of it:

- 1) Russian rock'n'roll is old
- 2) Russian rock'n'roll sucks
- 3) Russian rock'n'roll is a complex and deeply national cultural phenomenon

Now let me touch on each of these points one by one:

Russian Rock'n'roll Is Old

Despite the popular and widespread belief, particularly in the West, Russian rock'n'roll is not a recent phenomenon. It is 38 years old this year, which makes it just about eight years younger than its original American prototype.

According to the now-classic history of Soviet rock music entitled

Back in the USSR by Artemy Troitsky, the first Soviet (here we use "Soviet" or denoting something that later becomes "Russian") rock'n'roll band played in 1961 in my hometown of Riga, Latvia. They were called The Revengers and played covers of American rock'n'roll standards and sang in English.<sup>1</sup> Soviet Russian rock history can be broken into four parts: From its inception in 1959 to approximately 1970: This first period of Soviet rock'n'roll history began and we are, of course, until 1991, talking about Soviet rock history. It becomes Russian with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was a relatively happy period, when, according to memoirs of participants, rock'n'roll was mainly played in the dance halls. It was dance music to which authorities did not strongly object. Mostly bands played covers of Western songs and were often allowed to sing in English.

From 1970 to approximately 1985: But the times "are a changin'." And they were changing in the West, too. Out of happy dance music about

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<sup>1</sup> Artemy Troitsky, Artemy. 1988. Back in the USSR. Boston: Faber and Faber, p. 21.

surfer, boardwalks and California girls, Western rock'n'roll was maturing into a more complex art form. Studio albums came onto the scene, following the example of the Beatles's Sergeant Pepper Lonely Hearts Club and Abby Road. Complex forms of art, techno and sympho-rock were born. Western rock stopped being pure entertainment, developed artsy ambitions, became serious, philosophical and preoccupied with "message."

Russian rock was closely following the footsteps of its Western brother. Poland and Polish rock played a great role here as a conduit of Western rock ideas to the East. Polish performers such as Czeslaw Niemen, bands Laboratorium or Scaldowie, and Polish avant-garde jazz became extremely influential in the Soviet Union.

Seeing their Socialist brother rock'n'rollers successfully singing in their own language, Russians began singing in Russian too. This coincided with Rockers having much more to say than "I love you baby." And this was the beginning of the trouble. Somehow Soviet authorities could not tolerate rock'n'roll in Russian. They probably started to sense the subversive power of the medium.

The 1970s became a period when Russian rock was endlessly anathematized and molested by the authorities. It virtually existed in the underground. Musical form and stylistics in this period were still purely Western, but lyrics were becoming more and more philosophical, playful, and honest, and this was perceived dangerous.

This period of endless struggle and learning and experimentation, with its different genres and styles, lasted until Perestroika (with the brief reign of Chernenko being the most difficult moment of it). During this time, rock'n'roll was perceived by authorities as a Western provocation designed to subvert the minds of Soviet youth. And authorities were right about the subversion part.

Russian proto-nationalists such as writers Valentin Rasputin, Stanislav Kuniaev, Viktor Astaf'ev and Sergei Mikhalkov endlessly dogged rock'n'roll, labeling it "Western moral AIDS."<sup>2</sup> Little did they know that just some ten years into the future the best forces of Russian rock'n'roll would make an unprecedented alliance with the most right-wing nationalists. But this happened later.

From 1985 to 1991: Now we enter the third period in the history of Russian rock'n'roll, a period of glorious struggle and absolute victory by the rock'n'roll community over the Soviet philistines. During this period the rock'n'rollers found themselves at the forefront of cultural and social struggle in the Soviet Union. Rock'n'roll provided the populace with language and idiom free of restrictions of Soviet newspeak. It freed the very national discourse. It assaulted and hijacked it. Rock'n'rollers became the first free people in the non-free country long before the victory of Perestroika.

Not surprisingly, newspapers and TV programs were filled with features discussing evils and virtues of rock. Every concert was conceived to be and was perceived to be a blow to the Soviet regime. But the rock

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<sup>2</sup> Troitsky, p. 9.

community openly defied censorship and at one point totally abolished it. A watershed event, the final blow to Soviet censorship, can be attributed to one particular band and to one particular performer: Telesvisor from Leningrad and its front man, Mikhail Barzykin. In 1988, he simply refused to submit his lyrics for approval of censors. Telesvisor played without this approval and...nothing happened. After that moment, everyone started playing without clearing things with censors.

During this period, Rock'n'rollers started to perceive themselves and were perceived by the masses as new-style spiritual leaders of the youth. They pretty much occupied the position usually reserved in the hearts of Russians for their great poets. Now rock'n'rollers were the cultural heroes.

From August 1991 to present: The struggle came to an end in August of 1991 with a collapse of Soviet Union, which opened the fourth period in the history of Russian rock'n'roll. This period has lasted until today and can probably be viewed as the most dramatic, difficult, and confusing period in the history of Russian rock.

With the collapse of the Soviet regime, to which rock'n'roll contributed to an extent much greater than any other contemporary art form in Russia (with the possible exception of literature), came a rather unexpected loss of identity, a personal and creative crisis for many rock'n'rollers. They suddenly lost their spiritual leadership, the thing that had been driving them, and out of glorious rebels they turned into simple entertainers, subjective to forces of a free market. No longer was it enough to be a professional hero: in post-Perestroika one needed to be a professional. And they were professional heroes but not professional musicians. This was the time to redefine themselves, to reinvent themselves, to find a new place in the new world or to find new demons with whom to fight.

#### Russian Rock'n'roll Sucks

Anyone familiar with the Russian rock scene knows that Russian (Rock'n'rollers cannot play. In their majority (with tragically few exceptions),

the level of musicianship in Russia does not even remotely approximate Western musicians. Playing is sloppy, musicians rarely work on their music, polish it, try to get it perfect. The punk idiom "anyone can rock" is taken in Russia to the extreme and "three chord wonders" are found on every corner.

But how many Sex Pistols can one country accommodate? The answer is, apparently, very many....

They have been playing for 40 years and still cannot play? Why is this? There have been many attempts to answer this question. English rock-producer Brian Eno, who in 1989 produced probably the most brilliant Russian rock album ever, "Songs from Russia" by Zvuki Mu, explained this phenomenon in a typical Western manner by saying that Russian music does not "come from the crotch." Russians don't have a natural sense of rhythm here. But so don't the majority of Western white rockers....

Others blamed the poor level on musicianship on bad equipment. But today and at least for the last 10-15 years, Russians have all the equipment they want and still the results are meager. Not to mention the fact that black musicians in the Mississippi Delta proved long ago that lack of good instruments does not prevent musicians from playing great music. They turned even washboards into a glorious instruments. So what is the problem?

Russian Rock'n'roll is a Complex and Deeply National Cultural Phenomenon

Back in the 1980s, one of the most original and prominent Russian rock'n'roll figures of all times, Sergey Zharikov, a drummer and a moving force of the Moscow semi-avant-garde rock band OK (with a scandalous reputation in the Soviet Period) gave a very interesting and unusual explanation of the Russian rock phenomenon. In a series of groundbreaking essays that appeared from 1995 to 1997 in the Moscow underground zines SMORCHOK and SDVIG, Zharikov, who also today happens to be one of the most prominent ideologues of Russian nationalism, looked for the roots of Russian rock in both Russian medieval carnivalesque tradition and in traditional Russian conservative thought.<sup>3</sup>

This is, of course, a very extravagant view of things and can be dismissed for its eccentricity. But I will not dismiss it at all. On the contrary, long before I became familiar with Zharikov's ideas, I came on my own to a similar conclusion and even made it the thesis of my doctoral dissertation on the peculiarity of Russian rock tradition.<sup>4</sup>

All Russian music lovers know how real rock'n'roll has to sound. They all listen to Western music and know it very well. And still the majority of Russians prefers Russian rock. Why? Because there is something for them in this music which often does not even sound like anything that we call rock'n'roll in the West.

This is why Russian rock, as bad and as unprofessional as it is, has such a strong grip on Russian masses: because it is deeply national and it is permeated with these Bakhtinian carnivalesque elements that make it so dear to the hearts of Russian youth as "their" music.

Indeed, Russian rock is deeply carnivalesque. Of course, all rock'n'roll is carnivalesque to a degree (with the exception of German rock). But Russian rock is so extremely carnivalesque that when you remove this one element you are left with almost nothing else. Of course I am not talking here about all Russian rock'n'roll, which is a very broad and varied phenomenon, but about its most original and authentic examples.

To summarize "carnivalesque" for our purpose, we boil this term down to its essence: carnivalesque presumes temporary suspension of normal rules governing society and substitution of such rules with temporary new ones: carnival presumes free merry-making, buffoonery, clowning, circus

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<sup>3</sup> See a concise treatment of Zharikov's rock-journalism in Kushnir, A. 1994. *Zolotoe podpol'e: polnaia illiustrirovannaia entsiklopediia rok-samizdate, 1967-1994*. Nizhnii Novgorod: Dekom, pp. 98-101, 226-229.

<sup>4</sup> Yoffe, Mark. 1991. *Russian Hippie Slang, Rock'n'roll Poetry and Stylistics: the Creativity of Soviet Youth Counterculture*. Dissertation. The University of Michigan.

lonosphere, humor, and satirizing of everyday reality. It is a normal world turned inside out, when the inside becomes a street sweeper and the pauper becomes a king. Carnival stylistics deals with things that otherwise are taboo in society: lower body functions, sex, gluttony. Closely related to taboos is the Bakhtinian juxtaposition of official and unofficial culture. There is such a dichotomy in each society: official culture of the state/government, official church vs. unofficial folk culture of simple people, of the street vs. upper social strata. These carnivalesque elements are the redeeming features of

Russian rock'n'roll, which makes it interesting and frighteningly unusual.

From my point of view, the most interesting bands (which also happen to be some of the most scandalously popular Russian bands) to a great degree trade on the carnivalesque. Such are Zvuki Mu, Zharikov's DK, Trannye Igry, Nol', and of course Grazhdanskaia Oborona, as well as two late demi-gods of Russian rock, Alexander Bashlachev and Yanka Diageleva.

So how did these Russian rockers adapt to a new Russian reality, to a new brave world of mafia-capitalism? They did not! These carnivalesque buffoons went back into the underground which indeed is their place. Around 1993 a strange phenomenon started to take shape, when some of the most prominent rock'n'rollers joined ranks with the extreme Russian nationalists and right-wingers.

Everyone knows about the infamous Russian Liberal-Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. But not everyone knows about his alliance with rock'n'roll.<sup>5</sup> That very Sergei Zharikov whom I mentioned as a theoretician of carnivalesque tradition in Russian rock, early in 1992 joined Zhirinovskiy's shadow cabinet as a "minister of culture and youth affairs." In fact, writer Eduard Limonov, also a former member of Zhirinovskiy's shadow cabinet and Zharikov's friend, states in his book *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo* that it is Sergei Zharikov who is single-handedly responsible for creation of Zhirinovskiy's public persona, for coaching him in buffoonish antics that became such a trade mark of the Zhirinovskiy style. The only problem, Limonov says, is that Zhirinovskiy vulgarized the brilliantly subtle stylistics that Zharikov taught him.<sup>6</sup>

Another great star of Russian rock'n'roll who gave Zhirinovskiy his endorsement was Egor Letov of Grazhdanskaia Oborona. A hero of anti-Soviet rock underground, Letov has a sure grip on the pulse of thousands of young Russians who, in 1993 elections as well as in many elections that followed, marched to cast their votes for Zhirinovskiy.

Later, in November of 1992 (just a few months after they joined Zhirinovskiy) Limonov and Zharikov left the Liberal-Democratic Party and

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this alliance see Yoffe, Mark. 1994. "Vladimir Zhirinovskiy: the Unholy Fool." Pages 324-326 in *Current History*.

<sup>6</sup> Limonov, Eduard. 1994. *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*. Moscow: Konets veka 94

reated their own nationalist parties: the National-Bolshevik Party and  
 rational-Radical Party. At this point they were joined by another brilliant

musicians mentioned here began as members of the anti-Soviet cultural  
 resistance, mole ted by the KGB on numerous occasions. And now they have  
 turned into most hard core nationalists, displaying strongly anti-Western and  
 anti-capitalist sentiments.

What happened? Russian rock'n'rollers finally found their new adversaries: capitalist pigs, Westerners, Russian pseudo-  
 democrats, mafia-capitalists, New Russian elites, Russian Westernizers, etc. A new Russian philistine to combat  
 emerged. And this had a direct impact on the quality of Russian rock. In the West, musicians play pretty music, care  
 about details, polish the sound and value professionalism. Russian rock is not about professionalism. Russians are not  
 about professionalism, they are about carnival and about passion.

Where in the 1970s pro-western tendencies were a stylistically determining factor in Russian rock, producing lots of  
 Western look-alike and

ound-alike music, today anti-Western is the domineering style and musicians try to sound as non-Western as possible.  
 The result of this nationalist tendency is non-ending nostalgia for Russian pre-revolutionary and Soviet pop-culture, folk  
 traditions, urban romances, peasant songs and Soviet-period pop songs. These works are sung over and over again in  
 different ways by rock stars. And so are folk songs. And so are war songs.

There is much great and serious work that these rockers do with nostalgia, but a continuous shortcoming of their style is  
 still their contempt for professionalism. They still believe that to be a Russian rock' n' roller you need to know "only  
 three chords."