

## Russian trumpet and La-la

The legacy of *ruskii rok* in contemporary Russian popular music

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### 1. Introduction

*Ruskii rok* is a term used for a strain of Russian popular music which emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s in Russia. One of the centers of *ruskii rok* was the Leningrad<sup>1</sup> Rock Club, the first rock organization in the Soviet Union. Groups that were linked to the club were inter alia *Alisa*, *Akvarium* and *Kino*. Most of these groups have reached canonical status in Russian (rock) music and are influential in contemporary popular culture. The still performing groups draw huge crowds at concerts - both people who grew up with the music and young people who grew up in Post-Soviet Russia.

In this paper I want to outline a part of the discourse around *ruskii rok* in St. Petersburg and then give two examples of how contemporary bands relate towards *ruskii rok*. This paper is based on field work and participant observation done in St. Petersburg from 2004 to 2006.

### 2. Nashe radio...

One platform which heavily plays and promotes *ruskii rok* is the radio station *Nashe radio*. *Nashe radio* started broadcasting december 1998 as the first project of the *Logo-VAZ News Corporation*. The corporation was founded by the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky (now living in the UK) and the media mogul Rupert Murdoch. *Nashe Radio* is broadcast via satellite to a network of local *Nashe Radio* stations throughout Russia. Each local station receives broadcasts from Moscow and have two to three hours of local programing.<sup>2</sup>

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1. As St. Petersburg was called from 1924 to 1991.

2. The local branch in St. Petersburg, which started broadcasting in 2001, is special since it has 13 hours/day of local  
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**OH 1: Nashe Radio's target group**

According to the St. Petersburg branch's general manager Elena Danilova<sup>3</sup> the listeners can be divided in two parts - the young who fell in love with the music not long ago and a part who grew up with the music. This is also reflected in the statistics of the main target group of the station: the age group 25 to 39 (34%) followed by the age group 12 to 19 (27%). Within the target group 18 to 45 with a single income the station's reach is 6.89% and thus ranks 4th out of 22 stations polled in St. Petersburg.<sup>4</sup>

The groups and singers aired cover both the 'heavy weights' of Soviet Rock (which mostly are still active today) like *Akvarium*, *Alisa*, *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, *Kino*, *Aria*, *Chaif*, *DDT*, *Butusov* and contemporary Russian groups like, *Surganova*, *Leningrad* (songs without course words), *Nochnye Snaipery'*, *Zemfira* and *Billy's Band*. According to Danilova<sup>5</sup> the mixture is 60% old and 40% contemporary music, in other words more than half of the played groups are groups linked to *ruskii rok*.<sup>6</sup>

Among the programs aired, the show *Letopis* ("Chronicle") is worth mentioning. Elena Danilova described the show this way:

**OH 2: Elena Danilova on Letopis**

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broadcasts. This is due to the specificity of the city and its size according to the general director of the St. Petersburg branch, Elena Danilova (2006).

3. Danilova (2006)
4. Danilova (2006). Nashe Radio had a daily reach of 5,2% (place 16 out of 30) in St. Petersburg for the period May to July 2006. It's AQH share for that period was 3,4% (place 16 out of 30) (TNS Gallup AdFact 2006).
5. Danilova (2006)
6. An interesting side remark is that the Logo-VAZ News Corporation also includes Real Records founded in 1999 (Yarotsky 2002). Real records is a record company which includes the labels Real Records, Iceberg Music and Zazhigai M'iuzik. Their rooster contains groups from Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia covering both rock and pop. The (rock) groups include the russian groups DDT, Akvarium, Zemfira, Mumii Troll', Kino, Splin, Kalinov Most, Chaif, Krematorii, 2va Samoliota, Alisa, Nochnye Snaipery, Mul'tfil'my and the Ukrainian group Okean El'zi (<http://www.realrec.ru/artists.php>, visited on 05.09.2006). By coincidence most of their rock musicians are also heavily featured on Nashe Radio...

**HB 1:** Elena Danilova on Letopis (0:20) - Track 1

Danilova: "Chronicle" - it's a program about such famous albums of musicians, who... who contributed to the music. It's aired once a week."

These "important recordings and musicians" seem to be focused on the Soviet rock-heritage such as *Akvarium's* album *Treugol'nik*<sup>7</sup> (released 1981) and *Alisa's* album *Energia*<sup>8</sup> (released 1985) and the early 1990s. In other words mostly *russskii rok*.

The radio station also sponsors festivals and CDs for the artists they air. *Nashe Radio* can thus be seen as a station promoting *russskii rok* both on a local level (within the popular music scene) and a national level through its reach.

### 3. Russskii rok today

While musicians see *Nashe radio* and other radio stations as a possibility to promote their music, today's musicians are rather ambivalent in their opinion towards both *russskii rok* and *Nashe radio*. This is how Roma Parygin (RP), *Spitfire's* trumpet player, defined *russskii rok*

**OH 3:** Roma Parygin: Polnoe govno

**HB 2:** Roma Parygin: Polnoe govno (00:07) - Track 2

ДЭВ: Что такое русский рок?

DEW: What is *russskii rok*?

РП: Полное говно! Следующий вопрос    RP: Complete shit! Next question.

The guitar player in *Con Brio*, Vitia Kultashov, defined *russskii rok* as music where the main focus was on the lyrics and the music was neglected.<sup>9</sup> He views the music as primitive and horrible.<sup>10</sup> Sasha Rudenko, *Svoboda's* vocalist, said that *russskii rok* is biased towards the lyrics while pop rock is biased towards music, and added that when brains do not suffice to write good lyrics the song is pop

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7. 09.01.06, 13:00 - 14:00

8. 05.01.06, 13:00 - 14:00

9. He added that the music was also built around the same harmonic progressions.

10. Kultashov 2006

rock.<sup>11</sup> Sergei Chernov, the music editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, added that *ruskii rok* is primitive music with "messianic ideas" because the musicians involved see the music on the same level as Western Rock.<sup>12</sup> I found that these negative attitudes towards *ruskii rok* were quite common when I talked to musicians in St. Petersburg.

A part of the Post-Soviet generation of popular (rock) groups in St. Petersburg emerged within the club *TaMtAm* run by Seva Gakkel, a former band member of Akvarium. Operating from 1991 to 1996 the club was modeled on American Indie-clubs.<sup>13</sup> According to Sergei Chernov Seva Gakkel said that *ruskii rok* should not be played there. Chernov added that the groups which emerged orientated themselves musically internationally, not within *ruski rok*.<sup>14</sup> Groups associated with *TaMtAm* were inter alia *Shnur / Leningrad* and *Markscheider Kunst*, two influential and popular groups today.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, many musicians today have a distanced relationship towards *ruskii rok*. I would now like to give two examples of how bands from St. Petersburg position themselves in relation to *ruskii rok*. Both examples are groups that I played with as a trumpet player during my field work, thus I was able to gather firsthand knowledge of their strategies.

#### 4. Con Brio

**OH 4:** Vitia on lyrics

**HB 3:** Vitia on lyrics (@47:26 - 0:06) - Track 3

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11. Rudenko 2006

12. Chernov 2006. This way of thinking is not unique to *ruskii rok*: the Russian state sees itself excelling its Western European and US-American counterparts in such diverse issues as democracy, human rights, capitalism and diplomacy as Russia's handling of the spy accusations by the Georgian government recently demonstrated.

13. Zaytseva 2006, p. 8

14. See also Zaytseva 2006, p. 8. According to Chernov the club Griboyedov also avoids *ruskii rok*: "Although Griboyedov has hosted very diverse acts ranging from pop-rock to hip-hop to punk, it has made a point of avoiding massively popular, yet straightforward and unimaginative 'Russian rock'." (2006a)

15. Chernov 2006

Vitia: "I think that people who listen to the lyrics, they in general don't like music or really seldom listen to music."

Vitia Kultashov, the guitarist and one of the leaders of *Con Brio*, clearly disdains both *russkii rok* as well as Russian popular music. His dislike is based on the overly focus on lyrics and, in his eyes, primitive quality of the music. *Con Brio* was founded with the goal *not* to sound Russian. The aim of the band is to play light pop-rock or *popsa* (Pop). *Popsa* is in Russia normally used in opposition to *russkii rok* and *rock*. Asked how the project differs from *russkii rok*, Vitia answered

**OH 5:** Vitia on difference between *russkii rok* and *Con brio*

**HB 4:** Vitia on difference between *russkii rok* and *Con brio* (@14:07 - 0:41) - Track 4

Vitia: "Melody and chords which are used in this music, they are, I think, never used in *russkii rok* and that what was used in *russkii rok* is not used in our project. All those known melodys... Maybe we differ through the jazz sound - jazz not in the sense of improvisation / solo, no, but through jazzy chords and notes."

This attempt to not sound like *russkii rok*, not even to sound Russian, dominates the band's discourse. During the third rehearsal with *Con Brio* I quite quickly found out what playing Russian meant, as the following example demonstrates:

**OH 6:** *Con Brio* - Russian trumpet

**HB 5:** *Con Brio*: Russian Trumpet - rehearsal 28.08.2005 (2:28) - Track 5

“Vitia: You'll sort things out with the melody, no problem, right? In short [imitates trumpet] - is not necessary

DEW: You yourself demonstrated that

Vitia: I never sang [imitates trumpet] Like that, you know, that kind of Russian melody was there also at the first time. In short, play [it] as it is. And that [imitates trumpet] also, not "grr".”

This obsession about not sounding Russian was not only demonstrated during that rehearsal, but is a continuing discourse within the band. During a rehearsal Vitia said that one of the songs we had played sounded like an American *Popsa*-song. He added, that was good as long as it did not sound like a Russian one. He was also very proud, because he said he was playing the chords like in Russian Rock, but they did not sound like Russian Rock. At a different rehearsal the band played one of the songs with a beat of straight fourths on the Drums and a Reggaebeat on the Guitar (accents on the 2 and 4). The band members commented after the song that it was the "Russian" way of playing it.

## 5. Svoboda

Vitia was also the original guitarist in *Svoboda*, the next band I want to discuss. *Svoboda* has a different strategy in relation to *ruskii rok*. Playing *Ukra-Ska pung*, short for Ukrainian Ska Punk, the band promotes a strong Ukrainian identity based on the origin of the singer Sasha Rudenko.

However, analyzing the songs in detail uncovers several different layers of influence touching inter alia Ska, Punk, grunge, *ruskii rok* and Ukrainian folk music/poetry

A good example is the song *La-la*. Let us first listen to an excerpt:

**HB 6:** Svoboda: La-la (3:09) / Video (2:56) - Track 6

While the opening riff and the verse might remind you of *Nirvana's Smells like teen spirit* or *Offspring's Self Esteem* the base line is modeled on *Grazhdanskaia Oborona's Vsio idiot po planu*. *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* is a band which can be considered within the *ruskii rok* tradition. Here is a short excerpt:

**HB 7:** Grazhdanskaia Oborona: Vsio idiot po planu (0:41) - Track 7

These mentioned elements are packed within the band's signatory style, Ska-Punk flavored with a Ukrainian flair. The Ukrainian flair in this song refers to the lyrics which according to Sasha are inspired by Ukrainian folk poetry:

**OH 7:** Sasha on Lala and folklore

**HB 8:** Sasha on Lala and folklore - (@24:22 - 0:39) - Track 8

DEW: Marusia and Choboti, which...

SR: which are closer to folklore, yes - or even LaLa - it is such based on the lyrics. [...] Villages are very connected with exactly folklore. And *Selo moi pustie, na nochi vimerlo* [my village is empty, in the night there's nobody] that also has some kind of Ukrainian folklore, because folklore most of all is in the Ukrainian villages. It is those *Khaty* [peasant houses] *Mazanki* [clay-walled huts] with those... [...] *Salo* [slabs of pork underskin fat] *Horilka* [Ukrainian vodka] - well, I try not to use those kinds of clichés, *Salo Horilka* because it is the main cliché [...] Yes, you can say that also La-La relates to that [folklore]."

The Soviet band *Kino*, which is considered *russkii rok*, has also left its traces: The sound of the opening riff of the song *Dengi*<sup>16</sup> is influenced by both *Nirvana's Come As You Are* and *Kino's Spokoinaia noch'*. The *Kino* cover of *Mama anarkhia* is sung in Ukrainian over a ska-punk rhythm and announced as a Ukrainian folk song. When asked why *Svoboda* plays the song, Sasha said that the song being a good song in a punk style fits the band.<sup>17</sup>

Talking about the group Sasha added that he originally never thought he would sing Ukrainian songs. He wanted to play serious songs like Aleksandr Bashlachiov, an influential Russian singer-songwriter on the fringes of the *russkii rok* idiom.<sup>18</sup> The mentioned guitarist, Vitia Kultashov, who was vital in forming the repertoire, said that when he entered the group the style was *russkii rok*, but that the style changed to ska-punk.<sup>19</sup> This change was pushed even further through the new guitarist, Prokhor Ivanov, who had been involved in other Reggae/Ska projects before joining the band. In a

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16. "Money"

17. Rudenko (2006)

18. Rudenko 2006

19. Kultashov 2006

conversation Sasha<sup>20</sup> mentioned that Prokher introduced the *slabye doli*, the accented off-beats associated with ska and reggae. Thus the *ruskii rok*-legacy which is inherently present in the songs is now not part of the official narrative of *Svoboda*.

## 6. Conclusion

In my paper I have outlined the role of *ruskii rok* in contemporary St. Petersburg / Russia and how it is perceived by local musicians and music critics. I then charted two strategies in dealing with *ruskii rok*: *Con Brio*, which defines its style in negation to *ruskii rok* (and Russia in general) and *Svoboda*, which defines its style as Ukrainian Ska Punk, but which foundations also draws on *ruskii rok*. So even though no new bands emerge with the aim of playing *ruskii rok* the style retains an important and influential role within the contemporary popular music discourse.

## 7. Literature

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## 8. Discography

Grazhdanskaia Oborona: "Vsio idiot po planu" 1988

Kino: "Noch", 1986

Kino: "Gruppa Krovi", Moroz Records 1996 (1988)

Nirvana: "Nevermind", Geffen (GED 24425) 1991

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The Offspring: "Smash", Epitaph 1994

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