

Interview with Mikhail Borzykin.

St Petersburg, 22th September 2001.

Mikhail Borzykin: Lead singer, songwriter and the creative mind of the band Televizor since 1984.

The interview was conducted in Russian with pen and notebook. Borzykin read and approved of the manuscript and added some comments and corrections in June 2002.

Those present:

MB: Mikhail Borzykin

Y: Yngvar Steinholt

Y: The album *Otechestvo illiuzii* was released in 1987. But at that time the band Televizor had already existed a few years and it seems not all songs were new. When were the songs for the album written?

MB: We started playing together in 1984. The band has had 5 different line-ups (a lot of guitarists). *Otechestvo illiuzii* wasn't really released properly in 1987. It did exist in tape copies, but wasn't released in a proper manner until, probably, 1990. The songs for the album were written from 1985-86 and the album was recorded in 1987.

Y: And the song *Syt po gorlo* was written about when?

MB: it must have been in 1985 or 86, probably 86.

Y: You recorded the album in the studio at LDM (Leningradskii Dom Molodezhi). How did you record it, what kind of equipment was there, who engineered, etc.?

MB: We used an 8-track. The sound engineer's name was Kazbekov. The studio was very small, but the equipment was not bad. It was *firmennaia* [foreign make], though relatively

cheap. We had a Yamaha DX 21 synth, and a Soviet make analogue synth, AKG microphones. The drums were recorded in three takes, where only two drums were played during each take, the cymbals by themselves, etc. A bit strange, but it was supposed to be very professional. The guitars were placed far to the sides, which made them come out a bit weakish.

But the song *Syt po gorlo* was recorded in a different studio, a radio studio at Dom Radio. We had very little time, but the equipment was very good. It was a studio where a whole philharmonic orchestra could be recorded. The sound engineer was Sasha Dokshin, a very talented man. Among other things he now works with Vitia Sologub's band Deadushki. In the song you can hear a strange drum-sound, a combined knock and cough. These were 'sampled' sounds, mixed on top of each other and played on the synth keyboard.

Y: If I should say what possible musical influences I imagine when listening to the album *Otechestvo Illiuzii*, it would be Depeche Mode, early Simple Minds, Kraftwerk, The Clash. Among Russian bands first and foremost Strannye igry and Alisa. Would you agree to that?

MB: Maybe not so much The Clash. Perhaps in a song or two there might be something, but nothing dominant. I would add Madness, which was the band Strannye igry were obsessed with, but we used that influence less directly. Talking Heads, Cure, Duran Duran, Nik Kershaw, and there was this guy Howard Jones. The Smiths. There were lots of bands at the time that merely stole riffs from bands like The Smiths, without being able to reach the vocal standards. Lots of plagiarism. I never wanted to do that. Everybody knew who stole sounds and songs and from where, but we led a relaxed relationship with those who did.

At the time, BG wanted very much to be Bowie. Akvarium went through a period with lots of stylistic experimentation during the early 80s and were at different times heavily influenced by Bowie, Eurythmics, Cocteau Twins and other British bands.

Y: Are there in your opinion other Russian groups or singers that have had an influence on your sound?

MB: Well, I think Akvarium had a great influence on everybody. Especially how to write and perform songs in Russian.

Y: And the bards?

MB: Televizor is very far removed from the bard-culture.

Y: Do you think that the Russian/Soviet estrada had any influence on your music? Are there any aesthetic similarities?

MB: We had all that, we heard it in our childhood, but I for my part started hating all that *sovok* from around 8th grade. All those 'normative chords' and musical cliches were something we loathed and took care to avoid.

Y: Can it be said that *because* you were careful to avoid estrada sounds and patterns, that was in itself a kind of influence?

MB: Yes, I suppose if you see it that way...

Y: Do you see any special reasons why Depeche Mode became so popular in Russia in the mid 80s?

MB: Not all of Russia, rather Moscow, Leningrad, probably Sverdlovsk, too... It was their cool aggressiveness, that neo-punk sound. Around 1983-84 came this new industrial sound that hit us like a fresh breeze. We knew Beatles and Stones, we knew blues and hard rock and were getting enough of that, this was a new feeling. I think those lyrics, *Master & Servant*, made a certain impression, too...

Y: I always felt that the voice had something Russian to it.

MB: Yes, it has this northern deep chill.

Y: About the lyrics: Who had the most significant influence on your lyrics at the time?

MB: Many, and rather several at once, rather than someone in particular. Hesse, Bulgakov... *Master and Margarita* was a book that set things in circulation in lots of brains at the time. Sartre, Nietzsche... I was and am very much concerned with the relationship between the individual and the masses.

Y: Do you think that there were certain common stylistic traits shared by LRC bands? Was there a common sound or different styles that were opposed to each other?

MB: There were no deeper antagonisms. Of course, many were of the opinion that Kino made songs for girls. Tsui and his band were very aware of their looks and outward appearances. They were what we called *modniki*. There's nothing negative in that expression.

Y: A friend from Piter told me that there was some sort of class difference between Kino and Akvarium. The former was music for technical students and the latter more for the 'university intelligensia'.

MB: No, well, at the time, that was probably true. I think most of the difference lay in Kino having a much younger audience, like 14-16 year old mid teens, many of them girls. But at some point BG became very involved with Tsui, presented him as a new, talented songwriter, and performed with him. He helped him a lot. After that it became more 'appropriate' to like and appreciate his simple and straightforward songs.

There is talk of a 'Piter school', but those things are fairly abstract. I think the industry, the port, the northernness of this city, the weather, even partly the architecture of the city contributed to very close bonds to England, the UK and British rock. I was in a band at school. It was an English language school, so we were allowed to sing English songs as a part of language training. And we went through The Beatles, Stones, Sweet, and to some extent Mashina vremeni.

Y: Another question along the same lines: Were there at LRC strict musical conventions to be followed or was it a place where different stylistic views and ideas circulated and intermingled?

MB: When people started to react to my more daring and provocative lyrics it produced a countereffect with me and made me write even more provocative lyrics. BG and others (Zoopark and other members of the older generation) were afraid that such provocations could put the LRC in danger. This led me to lose interest in Akvarium from around 1984. Today, of course, all that is forgotten and there are no more bad feelings. Akvarium likes complexity. My first album was made under influence from BG. We used to have long discussions and quarrelled about what BG would mean by this or that song or by this or that line. It could go on for weeks. Everybody involved would get worked up and increasingly convinced that he knew the right meaning. Then, when BG was asked, he would simply say with a shrug: 'Oh, that! What I meant to say? Well, nothing in particular'.

After that I was drawn more in the direction of Maik. And I found that open lyrics were that much more difficult to write. It puts a lot more work into the composition because the music must carry more meaning. Every sound must be selected with care to make it work. I have a very relaxed attitude to religiosity. With people like BG and Kinchev. It's clear that christianity can help you reach a wide audience: Use some biblical phrases and a dash of christian mysticism and suddenly you have a million people behind you.

Y: Like the more recent U2?

MB: Exactly. It is very effective from a strictly commercial point of view.

Y: Is it possible to mention any common musical qualities between LRC bands from 1981-86?

MB: I think we belonged to the third (not second) generation of LRC bands. We had Dzhungli, who made mostly instrumental pieces in jazz-rock avant-garde style, Strannye igry who had a big line-up with lots of musicians and cooperation going on, Alisa who were experimental and

had an aesthetics similar to ours. Chaif, a good, raw, punky band at the time, not like they became later; Ob'ekt Nasmeshek, punks, with whom we had good contacts (Their bass player is the man who later founded Tequilajazzz).

Y: And how did the Leningrad bands differ from bands in other cities?

MB: As I mentioned earlier, this city always was very Anglo-orientated, being an industrial port and a city with strong traditions and all that... Heavy rock wasn't very popular here. LRC bands were quite academic as such. It was an intellectual rock environment. An intellectual elite, if you like. Heavy Metal wasn't the thing.

Y: And from rock in the UK or the US?

MB: We had restricted musical possibilities. And we saw rock music as the only way to an inner freedom, a way of thinking that was long since dead and gone in the West. We took everything literally, legends and all. If a UK band messed up a hotel room for the press to produce a scandal pr-effect they'd live neat and tidy ever after. Here it was done for real: TV sets from windows and all that. And Sid Vicious. Bottle throwing and pogo bloodbaths were not constructed over here. It was all for real. Here legends were believed and the kids did what they could with vodka and beer.

Y: A kind of naïve, in a positive sense, understanding of and attitude to what went on in the west?

MB: Yes, naïve in a good sense. But mind you we went through 30 years of rock history in only five years and all styles came crashing in at once: Hi, Mr. Hippie, Hullo, Mr Punk, Howdy, Mr. Bluesman, you all right? And another difference, I think, is that the Russian language has a very different melodiousness, which has a strong effect on the music.

Y: What about the relations between the LRC and the KGB?

MB: I remember those inexplicable characters that kept walking about at concerts. I addressed the phrase *s bettonnym vzgliadom* [with a concrete gaze] to them. I don't think we knew at the time exactly what was the role of the KGB, but we were aware that odd things went on. We also had some problems, especially with the song 'My idem'.

Y: The LRC generation conflict?

MB: The clan at LRC consisted of first wave bands: Akvarium, Zoopark (later, Kino was adopted). They could tour quite freely and led a much easier life than us. As we were being increasingly controlled and monitored, they started being left alone. Of course, Mike had his times of trouble, too, but that was before this point. From 1986 when we were being banned by the Club Council, he was already in the clear. There was much discussion of whether or not to make compromises with the authorities. Some were more willing to do that, others were less. It was a serious game.

Y: How do you regard Russian rock of today?

MB: Now I see a negative tendency in Russian music. Everything is becoming the same. We got this Mummi Troll guy who sings in his slick honeylike way. It's disgusting, and now we have 8-10 others trying to sound like him. And what has happened to a band like Chaif... I do respect Sologub, though. I think what he does with Deadushki is really good. Tequilajazzz also have kept the punch of their early works.