

Interview with Andrei Burlaka. St. Petersburg, 24th October 2001.

Andrei Burlaka is a music journalist and critic. He was a member of LRC council (1984-1989), the editor of the music journal 'RIO' (1985-1990), and is the author or co-author of several books on Russian and Western rock music and culture, including:

-Rock Music in the USSR (1990)

-Kto est' kto v sovetskom roke (1991)

-Rock Blitz (1992)

-Rhythms of Ages (1994)

-Rock over Russia (1996)

He currently runs the internet site 'www.rock-n-roll.ru.'

The interview was conducted in Russian with pen and notebook. The interviewee has read and approved of the contents of the translated text. His comments and additions are attached on pages 8-9.

Those present:

Y: Yngvar Steinholt

AB: Andrei Burlaka

Y: The question of how to identify 'russianness' in the works of LRC bands occupies me. Sergei Kurekhin once said that there are no differences between any European form of culture and the corresponding Russian form apart from two additional features of the latter: foulness and madness. Is it really impossible to name Russian cultural elements in rock music more specifically?

AB: Kurekhin loved such jokes of generalisation. Of course there's always a bit of truth in them, otherwise they'd be bad jokes. But unfortunately such jokes in the end brought him to a point where members of the most right-wing organisations (Pamiat and others) wanted to make friends with him. When he was out to shock to get attention, they took him literally. But his

influence on Akvarium's music was important. I'd go as far as to say that the albums Treugol'nik, Tabu and Radio Afrika are songs by BG performed by Composer Kurekhin's band under supervision (more or less) by Tropillo.

Y: Does the voice have a special function in Russian rock?

AB: The voice was the carrier of information. Tropillo understood that music was an important source of information. When a listener in a Siberian industrial town heard to a copy of an Akvarium tape album, he was supposed to be able to understand how people lived and thought about life in Leningrad.

Y: Other things?

AB: The lyrics, it is a point of some discussion, but I subscribe to the view that early 1980s Russian rock songs had a higher level of poetry than mainstream American or British rock songs. The lyrics were important to convey thoughts about songs heard, books read, about everything that was never mentioned in Soviet media.

Y: Was there a common musical style or a limited set of common musical styles among the LRC bands of the period?

AB: A limited set of styles, yes. The *avtorskaia rok pesnia* (lit. *author's / authored rock song*), as performed by Akvarium, Zoopark and Kino, among other bands, and hard rock. Punk rock existed only outside the club. It is very important to remember that rock music was totally overlooked by Soviet media. New genres could not emerge through the media. All styles came at the same time, on top of each other: 60s, 70s, 80s, hard, R&B, Dylan songs, Morrison, progressive. And Tropillo's studio had a very important influence. Sometimes his tastes were decisive.

Y: Were there strict musical conventions at the LRC, which the bands had to follow to remain a part of its environment?

AB: There were the expectations of the audience. Groups like Strannye igry were cult bands. The broad masses didn't accept their music and they found themselves outside of an audience-defined context.

Y: In what ways did the rock music at LRC differ from rock music in other Russian cities?

AB: Leningrad (Piter) held an exceptional position. It's citizens have a high level of education and it is a port, which means it was always close to fresh information. In other cities there were also people with bright ideas, but where could they go with them? In Leningrad there was a rock club. There were lots of music everywhere in the 80s, but very little was released. There were a few exceptions from other cities, though, like Reviakin (Kalinov Most) and Chizh.

Y: And how did it differ from British or American rock?

AB: By the lyrical aspect, as I mentioned earlier. And by the fact that we had all the rock styles arriving here at once.

Y: Much has been said and written to the effect that British rock was the most important source of inspiration for Leningrad bands (from the 60s to the present day). Do you agree to such a view?

AB: Yes. The melody, especially the melody, is very important in English music. In the US things are more rhythm-orientated. Here, people like listening to songs and The Beatles' songs were first and foremost good melodies. On days of celebration we gathered to sing songs by The Beatles. They became a kind of folk music for us, because in reality we had no such thing. Plus Britain is a northern country, which gives us more in common.

Y: Do you think that the Soviet estrada had an influence on the music of the early LRC bands?

AB: Of course. On a harmonic level. Even that music wasn't made by martians. Everybody heard it in their childhood, but for the rock musicians of the 80s it was first and foremost estrada music from before 1970 that had an impact, as a kind of nostalgia. After that The Beatles took over.

Y: And the bards?

AB: The *avtorskaia pesnia* made its influence on BG (Akvarium) and Shevchuk (DDT). There was also a band called Tamburin, whose singer performed *avtorskie pesni* solo and rock songs with the band. But the bards weren't that popular among our generation. It was the music of our parents, and not even everybody's parents at that. Bard music was an elitary cultural form. In my home, my father was the director of a big factory, my mother a chief doctor at the central pediatric hospital, i.e. some kind of elite, but in a middle-sized Russian city, my parents sang jocular student songs. In the 1950s a new active policy for increasing the level of higher education started. There was a great demand for highly educated citizens back then. In the wake of this policy new cultural environments were formed, and it was in such environments that people listened to bard songs.

Y: Folklore?

AB: We had no musical folklore of our own. We had a pseudo-folklore – the Soviet folklore and apart from that we had Gypsy or Jewish songs and music.

Y: Can you think of other things that made a musical impact on Russian / LRC rock?

AB: You could say that neither jazz nor academic music had any considerable influence on our rock. Art-rock was very popular here, but we didn't have the instruments and sound-equipment to play or record such music.

Y: Returning to the question of lyrics and their role. The Moscow critic Artem Troitsky have written a lot to the point that the single most important quality of Russian rock lies in its lyrics. How do you relate to the views expressed by Troitsky?

AB: On that level Troitsky is self-contradictory, for his own favourite Russian band was Centr, and what lyrics did they write? I think that even when listening to songs by BG or Shevchuk, you don't have to know the lyrics to receive pleasure from their songs. You grasp a few phrases of the refrain and that does the trick. But earlier, before rock music started sounding through the media, the song as a means of communication was crucial to songwriters and bands. Songs were their way of communicating their thoughts, values, tastes and ideas - what books, poets and musicians they admired and so on. There was a lot of information that they wanted to spread and it turned out such information was in great demand, too.

Y: Could the ban on concert dancing have contributed to the central position of the lyrics?

AB: Well, of course when bands played at dances people could dance. It happened that dance-bands played in the style of Deep Purple and the like and we could dance like mad, but at concerts it was forbidden. I think they first started dancing at concerts in 1986, when Akvarium played their 8 gigs 8 nights in a row at the SKK Iubileinyi.¹ Before that we had UB-40 over and we couldn't dance. It was completely absurd. What lyrics were there to sit down and listen to?

Y: When speaking about Russian rock music, westerners have a tendency to treat rock music in the USSR as a political cultural form in opposition to the order of society. Many insist that rock music in the USSR was anti-Soviet and a *democratic* movement in a Western sense of the word. How do you relate to such views?

AB: We wanted to show the 'grown-up' generation that we didn't want to live like them. We couldn't understand why we weren't allowed to play our music, dress like we wanted to or

1. The number of the 1986 Iubileinyi gigs by Akvarium varies between different sources from 6 (Romanov) to 8 (Smirnov).

walk around freely with long hair. We didn't listen to western radio broadcasts like Voice of America, because there was too much talk and too little music, and not even the music we preferred. Neither did we acknowledge the western understanding of the word 'freedom'. To us it merely meant: You walk out the door: You can go right, you can go left – so, you're free! But they didn't let us play, listen to or enjoy rock music. This was at least partly a generation conflict. Politics appeared in rock around 1985-86.

Y: When it comes to different rock bands' answer to ignorance or repression from cultural authorities, there were several different strategies. The early Akvarium disguised as parody: 'We're only a bunch of idiots.' Later they took a zen buddhist stance: 'No use of force against evil.' In early Perestroika, Televizor proclaimed that: 'Censorship does not exist if ignored.' What strategies did other groups have?

AB: Compromises. To lesser or larger extents. They always had to make compromises. In the LRC we had constant fights over the candidates for the festival juries. It was demanded that we include official members of the Composers' Union and so on, but we wished to include more insiders. In 1986 this led to an open conflict within the LRC council. By then there was already a feeling around that something was possible and musicians felt that something was going on. And at this stage a new generation of LRC bands was appearing. The older generation was represented by Akvarium, Zoopark even the somewhat younger Kino. Among the fresh names were Patriarkhal'naia vystavka, Pristutstvie, Televizor and Aukcyon. And at the 1986 LRC festival there was a marked competition between Akvarium, as the leader of the old guard, and the new generation. The jury did not award the acts that the audience reacted to and the club establishment was confronted by a new group initiative. As a member of the LRC council I understood that the club had a new cultural grouping among its members and that it was necessary to help these new bands. I was pushed into opposition. So I organised the journal RIO. I distributed one issue each month. It was given away for free, because what was considered illegal in such activities was to earn or even receive the tiniest bit of money from them. I understood that there was nothing criminal in what I did. I wrote clean musical criticism, concert and album reviews, and no KGB-shnik ever bothered me in my work.

The LRC establishment, on the other hand, did react. We invited in contributors and helpers from outside the LRC ranks. RIO founded a new Russian rock language on the basis on normal everyday street jargon. In the beginning we wrote under pseudonyms, out of habit, not from fear. It was just supposed to be like that. And we were attacked by Roksi and the LRC, and it is quite fun now to look back on the language in which they attacked us: pure, official Soviet phrases. Gunitskii accused us of ‘anti-Soviet activities’ and so on. We printed RIO for our own money and exchanged it with other *samizdat* rock journals from other cities. As a consequence, when people came from other cities to the LRC festivals, they were, much to the indignation of the club establishment, asking for us. At the 1987 festival Borzykin made his last run of provocations. The next year he was back to singing poetic songs. The political peak in our rock music was reached in 1986. In the summer of 1987 the authorities were panicking, but by autumn (the Kinchev case) they already knew they’d lost. They just launched another provocation.

Y: I read this Rolling Stone article about the 1986 LRC festival. Wasn’t there some kind of police provocation that year?

AB: Yes, that is a real funny article (‘zabavnaia stat’ia’). The tumults at the 1986 festival, about which that Rolling Stone journalist wrote in the style of a war correspondent, were merely part of the game. It was normal rock club life. The police would break up the odd concert and pick out some musicians and fans to pester, it was nothing special.

Y: Is it correct to say that Russian rock of the pre-Perestroika era was independent of commercial structures?

AB: Yes, to the effect that musicians were absolutely free to write the music they wanted. And nobody got any money worth mentioning from their artistic activities. But all others got money. The managers. The ‘ideological side’ of the activities were not in themselves criminal, crime was mainly a case of sale for profit. That’s why we gave RIO away for free.

Y: How long did this non-commercial era last?

AB: For most musicians until about 1987. Then it was getting possible to live from making music. Co-operatives emerged, youth centres and so on. But musicians were the last in line to earn money.

Y: Could you say something on the albums *Nachal'nik kamchatki*, *Tabu*, *Uezdnyi gorod N* or *Otechestvo illiuzii*?

AB: Andrei Tropillo played an important role in the recording of *Nachal'nik kamchatki*. In his studio rock music was recorded in spring and summertime, when his students were on holidays. In 1983 the band Kino practically broke up ('fakticheski raspalas'). Therefore Titov, BG, Kurekhin, Gakkel', Kasparian, and whoever else found themselves in the studio, cooperated with Tsui to make the album.

Conversation, 5th September 2001, Music Club Moloko, St. Petersburg.

AB: 'Managers'... Here, unfortunately, that word was used to describe speculants, who made money on arranging 'underground' concerts. They took the initiative (from below) to form the LRC. They got the support of some bands, Piknik and others. But, ironically the 'managers' were the ones to lose on the formation of a rock club, because it destroyed their source of income. With the establishment of the LRC, underground gigs nearly ceased to exist.

Burlaka's e-mail additions and comments, 11th November 2001.

Possibly you could track down the poetic tradition from 19th century poetry to the age of decadence (early 20th century) to the cultural opposition of the 1920s to 40s to the poetic boom of the *Ottepel'* and the bards to... to the Rock Club.

As I see it, there was no dissident influence in the LRC but there was always a kind of hidden opposition because of the situation itself: We were listening to and discussing a "non-existent" musical style! There was a spirit of opposition, possibly, not against the System – we never believed that the System would be broken and hence never dreamed of it – but against some Stupids. There was something like a naïve faith that we had a chance to implant rock into

Soviet culture if we could overcome some stupid old idiots (and some stupid young bastards like Komsomol activists). Even today I believe that if the chief Soviet ideologist Mikhail Suslov – who was very-very old and very-very stupid – had died just four or five years earlier, the Communist Party would have had a chance to save Socialism! Gorbachev got the power too late. The things went too far, and when Gorbachev started changes they came like a snowball down a hill. We couldn't stop.

The phenomenon Leningrad rock is the product of a series of factors: a legal and more or less liberal Rock Club; Tropillo's non-commercial studio; the spirit of brotherhood in the rock community (not always, but in general) and the absence of competition between bands on other grounds than the cultural field; the ban on all sorts of musical activity outside the LRC (except in restaurants and dancehalls) – it was bad, but played a role; the establishment of similar cultural reservations for other groupings for artists (Tovarishchestvo eksperimentalnykh iskusstv) and writers (Club '81) meant we were all in the same boat and if you add the eternal rivalry between Moscow (the site of government) and St Petersburg (which goes back to the 18th century), you'll get the picture.

There was no *Khudsovet* in the LRC but a club council that ran the club's internal and external policy. The council's members were directly elected – one vote from each band and each club department (photo, information, rhythm-school, etc.).

There was an attempt to re-launch RIO in the early 90s, but that wasn't the best time for rock journalism.