

**Interview with Mikhail Borisovich 'Fan' Feinshtein-Vasil'ev,
Akvarium bass player and percussionist 1973-83,
at AnTrop Studios, Ulica Cvetochnaia, St. Petersburg,
June 11th, 2002.**

This interview was conducted by MD-player and microphone and subsequently written down and translated into English by the interviewer. The interview is divided in three-minute tracks and track numbers are listed in the text. The track numbers do not necessarily coincide with breaks in the conversation.

Y: Yngvar Steinholt (interviewer).

MFV: Mikhail Feinshtein-Vasil'ev.

Technician: AnTrop technician present during interview.

AT: Andrei Tropillo passing by.

In the following, brackets and square brackets are used to:

- Signify words or phrases that have been added during translation to clarify implied points, improve readability or supply additional information.
- Add information on voice modes where this is a significant part of the message (laughter, audible smiles, ironic voice, etc.).
- Original Russian terms used by the interviewee, in italics.
- Unidentified or partly unidentified words and expressions
- My summary of phrases which could not be translated in full due to reduced audibility.
- Summaries of longer digressions, which have been left out.

Background notes to this interview follow on page 12.

TRACK 2

MFV: Well, on with the questions!

Y: Well, about what's Russian in Russian rock we already spoke, that is...

MFV: Well, if we look at rock 'n' roll as a direction in music, that direction is the same all over the world, somewhere close, as they say it, this music, disco, estrada, classic, waltz. Waltz is waltz all over the world but with some national nuances. The same goes for rock music. In principle, the rhythm is international, the rhythm is the same. Harmonies are more or less similar. There are still these fundamental things that make rock differ, like its independence, let's say, from all kinds of official things, was born into the plan of rock and a certain aggressivity or even something pathological. Real rock 'n' roll is supposed to have a touch of artistic pathology to it. That is, the ideal performer of rock 'n' roll has of course to be [incomprehensible expr.] and so on and so on, you can guess that, too. These things exist also for Russian rock. But there are differences. Like historically, generally Russian music differs from celtic roots, so does rock music differ as well. It differs strongly on the lyrical level, because the lyrics are, in them, unlike [in] Western lyrics, a meaning is sought and primarily the meaning of life. And apparently that makes no sense in America, because it doesn't have any, say, indispensabilities to itself. Apart from Bob Dylan, apart from, say, it was with a few particular [songwriters]. But here [it goes for] everybody. And another thing: If you translate 'rock' into Russian, that word means 'fate', in German it's 'skirt', in English... And so on.

TRACK 3

You could print a sign on the graveyard, that the one who does this, is subconsciously indulging in something to do with fate and prophecy, [end incomprehensible]. Very many performers indulge in that. Well, the band writes a song about, well say, (something) deep, for youth and so on and so on. Another question is why do we have this thing that rock music doesn't bring money? That is it is popular, but it doesn't bring in money. That question is linked to, primarily, the roots of Russian folk music and so to say the reasoning of people who live in the province, and that makes up the largest part of the population, that is outside Leningrad, Moscow and Vladivostok and another little bulk of cities, where the traditions are stronger. There the artistic notion of music is entirely different and music has a different purpose, that is it has different goals. And there the purpose is to drink and dance. For that, gypsy music and jewish music fits better. That is music with a simple, marked rhythm you can't miss and to which you can drink and dance.

Therefore the music, what I want to say is: Our pop music and generally all that restaurant music is commercially more interesting to perform. And this is where you get the return effect from, like the ones I listed. The people who try to earn money from music, from making music only, they make music that is closer to restaurant music to make sure that it pays. Correspondingly, those who listen to it go to restaurants and can afford to pay for going to concerts. And in this way they develop their sort of music in this direction. The result is a closed circle, built on an interdependence between those who make money from the music and those who consume it. The maximum money output comes to those who play pop music. And that is preferably a beautiful girl backed with an easy rhythm and lyrics that don't demand thinking, like: 'I love you, you don't love me, I love Vasia, Vasia loves Kolia, Kolia is a paederast'.

Y: Could it be that this is because of a lack of an established local rock tradition? In the West rock sells very well...

TRACK 4

MFV: It has been marketed since the 60s and there already is a generation of people who started listening to it. Now they are already old people. But here it has practically been only one first generation, one kind of environment, that has been able to find that music and develop an interest for it. And the number of those people, that generation, is very small. So therefore, there really is no tradition for it here. And on the next level there isn't any system of good management. There isn't the most important system of band exchange. That is we have that Pugacheva-theatre, Art Studiia, they've got it set up, they look for people who constantly replace listeners [laughs] and form them, invent them. But rock is generally spontaneous. There are few bands, it's hard to come up with bands that were founded with some kind of goal in mind. How is it normally? It's a group of people who came together at school to play and somebody started writing songs. And another thing from my own experience. Before 1972 I wasn't able to imagine that one could write a Rock-'n'-Roll song in the Russian language. And when I got to know Boris Grebenshchikov that year it made such an impression on me that I abandoned every other band I played in and devoted myself to that. Because I was impressed

that... because, phonetically, to me, the Russian language seem[ed] to be unfit for that kind of melody, that kind of rhythm.

Y: And many thought that way at the time?

MFV: Yes.

Y: But even earlier some bands had started writing songs in Russian?

MFV: Yes, there were the Argonavty, the Kol'chebniki, I listened to all that, but of all the bands only Vladimir Rekshan's Sankt-Peterburg was to my taste. And we, I can say that the very same Grebenshchikov and myself went to his concerts, climbed in through the windows to see how it was. He was really practically the first, to those who may believe it, because Argonavty and all these Q-65, 2001, all these bands had an air of VIA, of Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles, over them. That was what the Soviet powers allowed in order to bribe the youth somehow [laughs].

Technician: And Mify I think

MFV: Mify, yes.

Technician: Where were they?

MFV: Now, well they were lightish. It wasn't enough for me [laughs].

Y: But they weren't entirely official?

MFV: Well, of course not.

TRACK 5

They were all non-professionals. And there's another thing. This time it's about the Rock Club. What I'm now telling probably is hard to understand for citizens of a capitalist country, if he didn't read about it before. That is in Leningrad it wasn't that bad, but let's say in Ufa, the KGB was literally pursuing people who got involved with this. Outright pursued. But why? Well, back then ideology was the main issue in our country. And a person who writes songs uncontrolled, sings them and, worst of all, has an audience, this person automatically becomes an enemy of the ruling power. The power was totalitarian and it started fighting this with all accessible means, that is beyond doubt, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore anybody who wrote songs were by the gates, literally, strictly, everybody who wrote [songs], everybody was registered and all were influenced, that is they received much money, summer houses, cars, to ensure that they wrote the things they were supposed to. And the internal control with those people who wrote Soviet songs was stronger than any external control.

Therefore there was no room for doubt. But when a young man has listened too much to The Rolling Stones or Pink Floyd, he's not likely to write a song as it's supposed to be anymore. Therefore all rock musicians, and especially those who wrote songs, or copied songs by others, were pursued. In principle the musical system was such that we had two organisations; Lenkoncert and the Philharmony, which... You know all this, so you don't find it interesting [laughs]... and there musicians met, tours were arranged, which is to say that the whole management was government run. And when these people emerged, who began to arrange concerts independently, underground, let's say with some Polish bands or Skal'dy or Breikaut, then firstly, making money from such concerts was illegal. What was the rule under Soviet power was; you go to work, receive your salary and there are no other ways (of earning a pay). You could win at loto, a lottery or some prize, but you couldn't go make an enterprise and receive money from it, you couldn't make a concert and make money from it. Forbidden. It was punished with imprisonment. Any many of those who arranged concerts were jailed.¹

TRACK 6

Y: The main thing, as far as I understood, was that they didn't earn any money from it.

1. Contrasts with Tropillo p. 3

MFV: Income, you mean?

Y: Income!

MFV: Yes, that was an anti-Soviet action, the worst anti-Soviet act.

Y: But if it wasn't possible to prove that there was an income, it was another...

MFV: Yes. Well, they caught, they caught some, others they didn't catch. Therefore there were made several attempts to start an organisation, called a rock club, which should have some kind of official status. To make that organisation an organisation, to have people work in this [unintelligible]. Well, because Lenkoncert wouldn't touch any such band. Not that anybody went there either.

And there were some attempts. There were two or three attempts. But all this had something to it... well as any initiative then, they tried a few times and soon had to give up. And then at the beginning of the 80s someone from the ranks of the KGB, apparently, I don't know, I didn't have anything to do with them, I learned about it later. They thought it would be better to let these people have their organisation and at least be able to watch them when they gathered. Of course they tried to influence us, but they couldn't. But they were around there anyhow. Well. We decided that instead of being jailed [snorts/laughs] or being hit by a car or being killed or put away, we'd rather join that very same, so-called Rock Club, [and we] received a stamp that gave the right to perform these songs. That is there sat a person with the proper education, our person, our own [laughs] and put a stamp on the lyrics that they may be performed. And the main thing was that now we could make official concerts and people could come to listen.

If someone wanted to go somewhere to another city, he was equipped with the appropriate piece of paper with the stamp of the Club and with a permission to perform those songs. They were all written down in print, and they were issued with a stamp, somewhere on them it was written that they could be performed. Well of course when it came to performing them some lines were changed [laughs] but in principle nobody would hear that, right? And this meant

that there was an official cover for this whole movement and it worked successfully, since nobody were jailed or shot, thank God. That is the result was there. So I worked there for how long? For six years I worked, absolutely for free [laughs]. That is, I was the leader of the admissions committee at the [Leningrad] Rock Club [LRC].

TRACK 7

Which means I took with me two members of the [LRC] council and went to dances or some kinds of parties or rehearsal places to listen. And in that way I found for instance Auktsyon. I was the first one there, Televizor, Dzhungli, all that happened and I granted them all admission. That is I admitted all the bands that are now well-known. That is, I took with me any two members of the council and if it was interesting we gave instant admittance and that was that [laughs]. That's how it was done.

Y: Some people claim that British rock had an especially strong influence on Leningrad rock. Why is that? Was that all due to The Beatles or were there other things?

MFV: Yes, thing is that The Beatles, or generally even internally in the relationship between The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, there was something like what Jagger said when he was once asked why The Beatles were more popular than them. He said (it was) because Lennon is more cynical. And that's in a way the answer, because cynicism is the main thing in rock [and] roll. But with them (The Beatles) cynicism is somewhat over the top when, say, when they sing with sweet eyes something completely [laughs], that has really kicks. And maybe you haven't thought about it, but Beatles were simply always sacred in Leningrad. It isn't for nothing that Kolya Vasin has become such a well-known person. He has, despite what we were saying, gone to an orthodox organisation to ask for help to build a church for the holy...[John Lennon]

But I told him long ago, which insulted him deeply, that to build a church for some holy person, it is necessary that he is first canonised, that is has been declared a saint. Only then can you build a church. If he hasn't been canonised yet, that means he is not a saint and if someone builds a church for someone that has not been canonised by the Orthodox Church, the-e-en,

following the Orthodox Church's instruction, that person is a heretic. Alternatively they just don't want to listen, don't want to hear about some unbelieving busker.

Technician: So aren't they building a church for Tropillo, then?

MFV: They haven't yet named it after Tropillo [laughs], although that's a little bit more modest [laughs]. That is, the John Lennon Church is Kolya Vasin's Beatles museum. That's it. It has been built and (you find it) on Pushkinskaia 10.

Y: Yes, I was there.

MFV: Yes, people go there and pray to their saint. And I, too go there and pray, too, because for me John Lennon is even maybe greater than Bob Dylan - I'm joking!

MFV: Another thing about Russian and western... This thing is something I realised a very long time ago: Western rock as such, most significantly American rock, is founded on an opposition to the official church. And that might count for God as well. But Russian rock [and] roll holds the diametrically opposite position where this question is concerned, because it emerged during the time of Soviet power.

Y: Under atheism.

MFV: Under atheism and thus everything always turns a 180 degrees when something new appears. Just like when a new tsar makes a new coin, he looks in the opposite direction of his predecessor.

[break]

Yes and in that connection Tropillo, with whom you were just talking, if it hadn't been for him, I don't think that... Well, of course history doesn't know the tracks it didn't take, but if Tropillo hadn't been there, the history of the development of Russian rock music would have been a

different one. Because he recorded the most important bands absolutely independently, and that in turn influenced everything that happened in Russia.

TRACK 9

Y: I observed that several non-Russian speakers claim they can hear from the sound of it that a rock song is Russian. There must be several qualities that makes this possible, for instance the voice is often very up front in the mix...

MFV: Well I used to be a sound man at gigs and recorded many albums. And many years ago it turned out that phonetically, the English language is built in such a way that the voice can be made more silent and it will still be possible to make out the words. But the Russian language is built in such a fashion that it must be made louder in order simply to make out its words, that's one thing. Then there wasn't any such sound equipment that would've allowed us to listen to music in that way. That is I always fought against that and I was always told that if the words aren't audible, it just isn't at all right. But in my imagination the drums were supposed to be louder, like in civilised countries. There I think we have two reasons why; from the equipment and the historical aspects of these things. And a second, phonetic one.

AT [appears at the door]: I'll be there in 5 minutes!

MFV: Yes, sir!

The Russian and English language are phonetically different. And there's one more thing: In vocal-instrumental ensembles, which the Soviet power accepted, drums were excluded completely. They used them so that they should be heard as little as possible, [because] it was held as a Western tradition. And in Russian bands the one who sings is usually the leader of the band. And when somebody, his wife or friend, tells him they can't hear what he sings, he immediately comes to the sound-man and says 'what exactly do you think you're doing, you cur?' and at the next concert the sound-man makes it louder to avoid being hit on the head, that's the typical scene.

Technician: Usually he makes everything else less loud because that sounds better. Because it usually doesn't help making it louder.

MFV: Yes, exactly. The professional understands that even better. I had the same problem when I told Akvarium's sound-operator, I would begin to say: 'Hey, make the percussion and drums louder so that there's some drive!' And then over came Grebenshchikov and said his wife told him that his voice was inaudible [laughs].

TRACK 10

Y: Were there differences between concerts and dances?

MFV: Yes, we played at dances too.

Y: Was the sound different at dances, or...

MFV: Yes at dances the sound was totally different, because there was no sound-operator at all. At dances we played combo [v kombike] and there was no operator [laughs].

Y: But the fact that people didn't dance at concerts then, I reckon that must also have influenced the sound. Because if a person can't move, can't dance to the music he would instead want to hear what's sung. Another kind of communication, simply.

MFV: Yes, but the thing is, you'll have to understand one more thing. Thing is that the way it was under Soviet power, that way it stayed for 70 years, and that's a major tradition. It lived in this generation too and it is necessary to understand it while it's still around, 'cause in 20 years all this will be forgotten. It's, say, not very strong, but it's still there. The printed word - mass media - couldn't get into anything that had to do with real life. Everything that was printed and that was related to real life was called samizdat or something. Therefore only poets that read their verses, bards, that is those beyond control, could do it and they were actually heard.

There is one more point, and it's even a funny one: why was Vladimir Vysotsky our national hero? Practically Vladimir Semenovitch replaced Western rock, even though he played only his three familiar chords. Sometimes he chose a fourth, sol, usually just la, re and mi, and that's it, and made melodies. Because that wasn't even the main thing. It was the timbre of his voice and what he sang about that worked magically on Russians. As I said in the beginning, rock [and] roll must have an element of pathology, because if it hasn't got pathology it becomes estrada, and we regarded rock as art over here, you know. That is, pathology has to be in there. And in Russia, pathology is to be in prison, and just that is seemingly an absolute form of pathology. And much of our music is about how I sit in jail, how bad I'm doing. That's in fact the Russian emotional equivalent to rock [and] roll.

Y: Like with Leningrad now, the band Leningrad

MFV: Leningrad is there and solid, that's right. But it isn't blat. It is the use of explicit lyrics. It says nothing about force or restraint. The prison-song presupposes being put under restraint and the band Leningrad miss that dimension. There's use of un-normative vocabulary. And since Shnur is most talented, he makes it very well as I see it, because it's an art to use such words in a country where everybody knows that they're banned and everybody still knows them. And use them in such a way that, pardon me, don't forget the little children. They quote them and don't have the faintest idea what they're saying, and that's bad.

[digression into Russian language and swearwords]

I started with that difference between prison songs and blat music. What's known as blat music is usually about thieves, that is about prison, about some kind of love that isn't answered. But mainly it is, so to say, for some reason maximised, that is this guy got drunk, killed his loved one and now he sits and weeps, well [laughs]. But the band Leningrad, that's not blat music, that's what I said.

[break]

Track 12

MFV: Yes, generally this movement is of course only possible in a totalitarian state, because in a normal country if something is done and it is possible to earn money from it, a person is always found that can exploit its potential.

[loose talk]

Notes to Interview 6

Mikhail Borisovich Feinshtein-Vasil'ev ('Fan')

Bass-guitarist of Akvarium from 1973 until the arrival of Aleksandr Titov from around 1983. Kept performing with Akvarium from time to time until the original line-up split. Member of the LRC admissions committee and a board member since the early days of the club. He is short-haired, jean-clad, friendly and relaxed.

Feinshtein has no wish to speak about Akvarium recordings: 'I see no point in saying again what has already been said a thousand times before.' He walks out into the corridor for a smoke while we both wait for Tropillo. Standing there, we start discussing what's Russian about Russian rock and after some time he changes his mind and asks if I have a recorder. We go to the same room where I interviewed Tropillo and start recording. In contrast to Tropillo, MFV is calm, relaxed, speaks slower, more low-voiced, and slightly slurred, but with conviction. The technician remains working nearby, occasionally adding comments, coughing or making noises.

Feinshtein puts considerably more jokes and ironic comments into his answer and laughs a lot. It is absolutely necessary to keep this in mind when reading the interview. The part about Kolya Vasin is the point where this sort of irony is most clearly expressed, but it runs through the whole interview. The most dramatic parts (like being shot) are obviously not to be taken too literally. Once one catches the humorous tone, the information is solid enough.