

Interview with Anatolii ‘George’ Gunitskii.

Fish Fabrique, St. Petersburg, 16th October 2001

Anatolii ‘George’ Gunitskii: Co-founder of Akvarium 1972 and band member until 1975. *Samizdat* rock journalist for Roksi. Member of LRC council. Now runs music program on local radio on Sundays.

Interview was conducted in Russian with pen notebook. Surroundings and atmosphere: Loud dub-music makes conversation somewhat difficult. Interviewee seems tired. He is friendly and cooperative, yet for some reason short-spoken and distracted. On the one hand he repeatedly complains that my questions are too general, on the other hand, when he’s asked more concrete questions, the answer is often that he ‘does not remember’. Unanswered questions and follow-ups have been edited out.

Those present:

Y: Interviewer

AGG: Anatolii Gunitskii

Y: Do you think it is possible to mention some Russian elements in Russian rock before Perestroika?

AGG: ...

Y: Kurekhin spoke of madness as the one and only Russian cultural quality...

AGG: Well, elements of the absurd were clearly present in Akvarium’s album *Iskushenie* (1974). They returned to somewhat lesser extent on the album *Treugol’nik* (1981). But that was much later and a lot less so.

Y: Is there a Russian rock voice?

AGG: The quality of the voice is determined by the lyrics, which are different because the language is different.

Y: Other things?

AGG: Poetry! The Russian rock song is first and foremost poetic. For some bands social thematics were important, for Televizor more, for Akvarium less, but the interest in social problems was brought about by censorship.

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

AGG: No, there were several different styles: The hard rock of Rossiiane, mainstream rock, the R&B of Zoopark, the new wave of Televizor, the ska music of Strannye Igry, and so on.

Y: But the punks remained outside?

AGG: That is correct. They fell outside. Not that we did not want to risk anything, but the club already had its problems as it was. And the punks were simply too much to handle.

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

AGG: The LRC festivals decided very much in that respect, especially in the first years of the club. The annual festival was the main event. The jury was supposed to consist of one half official delegates: a member of the Union of Writers, one from the Union of Composers, one representative of the VLKSM (Komsomol) one from LMDST, and the other half of our people. Later we put more effort in electing jury members with a real-felt interest in rock.

Y: I just read about the first LRC festival in 1983 and the quarrels over Manufaktura, the band that won the 1st prize that year.

AGG: Yes, I remember the controversy. The thing was that Akvarium, like any other band, had its good and bad days. Sometimes they performed better, sometimes weaker. But, honestly, there was something fresh and new in Manufaktura's performance and they had talented musicians in their line-up. Kondrashkin played the drums. Akvarium did not perform very well at that festival and afterwards Manufaktura lost it and eventually disappeared. The problem was that the jury, with their choice of that newcomer, forgot about the audience and its opinion.

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

AGG: I think Leningrad rock was more honest. It had more originality when compared to Moscow rock. Moscow and Leningrad were opposed to each other for a long time when it came to rock. The Muscovites didn't accept our bands and we didn't accept theirs. This started to change with Mashina vremeni's appearances in Leningrad but only much later with Akvarium's in Moscow. Today I find it very hard to give a more detailed account for the distinctive characteristics of Leningrad rock.

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

AGG: The technical quality was lower. But it was our own and we loved it for that reason. And the musical cultural level was higher in the west. Anyway our bands were closer to us.

Y: Many think British rock was the most important source of inspiration for Leningrad bands from the 60s to the present day. How do you relate to such a view?

AGG: Both British and American, and to lesser extent Finnish, German and other. I can see no direct connection between British rock and rock in Leningrad.

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

AGG: Our rock musicians had a negative attitude to the estrada.

Y: Do you mean by that, that it may have influenced LRC rock music only negatively?

AGG: Yes. Possibly by the absence of certain harmonies, structures and so forth.

Y: What about the bards?

AGG: Rock and the bard song are two different cultural forms, but they had some common functions. There was a style named bard-rock, represented by bands like Tamburin... BG played at Kliashkin's home. For him that was very important.

Y: Folklore?

AGG: Very few were influenced by folklore. It gradually grew forth in the songs of some bands (for instance Alisa), but that was later.

Y: Futurism and the avant-garde of the 1920s?

AGG: That would be possible to identify, but it would demand a whole article of its own. But not futurism in a literal sense. You'll find something here, a little there, but it was never characteristic.

Other things that made a musical impact on Russian LRC rock?

AGG: The cultural heritage as such: as a whole, not divided into categories.

Y: The Moscow critic Artem Troitsky, among others, argues that the single most important quality of Russian rock is in its lyrics. Still quite a few bands around for whom music and show

were no less important means of expression. How do you relate to the views expressed by Troitsky?

AGG: The audience would focus on the voice, on what was sung and they came to concerts to listen to songs. They didn't dance. I cannot remember that people in the audience danced at all at LRC concerts from 1981-1986. But music was a breath of freedom. Rock music was one of the reasons for Perestroika, not the only one, but one out of many. Rock music meant a lot more at that time.

Y: Westerners tend to believe 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?

AGG: Everything normal was anti-Soviet to a certain degree.

Y: When it comes to different rock bands' answers 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 it took a zen buddhist stance: 'No use of force against evil.' In early Perestroika bands like Televizor proclaimed: 'Censorship does not exist if ignored.' What strategies did other groups have?

AGG: To Maik (Naumenko) the main thing was to play rock-n-roll. His strategy was simple: He played rock-n-roll as soon and as long as he got the opportunity. Kino was a younger band and they matured later, when things were already changing. They had other and wider possibilities. The same goes for Televizor.

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

AGG: Yes!

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

AGG: It lasted to the beginning of the 90s, when different clubs, studios and labels started emerging. Now every band has a manager. They work differently. The rules have changed.

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

AGG: You'd better ask Tropillo about that.

Y: Yes, I hope I will get the opportunity. If I ask about Kurekhin's role in the making of *Tabu*?

AGG: Kurekhin's was a studio-influence. He did not make a big impact on the concerts. In the studio works his role was not decisive, yet important.

Y: Do you have something to add?

AGG: Well, the Rock Club was a part of my life. I could have told you more if your questions had been more concrete. You should talk to Sasha Starcev. He has the original copies of *Roksi*. There you can read more about how we looked at things back then.

Y: How big was the rock environment at the time?

AGG: The LRC venue could take an audience of 5-600. If a gig wasn't sold out, it meant the band wasn't very popular, interesting or good. From 1984-86 we started using bigger venues because of increasing interest.

Y: And the competition element at festivals, where did that come from?

AGG: It was a tradition in the Soviet cultural system, a part of what culture festivals were about.

Y: Some sources talk about theatre when describing the origins of Akvarium. What exactly were the relationship between Akvarium and that amateur theatre group?

AGG: We did not perform theatre, Akvarium neither composed music for plays nor played at them. But we had friends among the amateur theatre people.