

**Interview with N.O.M.zhir, in Nikolai Kopeikin's workshop,
Lermontovskii prospekt, St. Petersburg 26th October 2001.**

Those present:

NK: Nikolai Kopeikin, painter, ideologist and responsible for N.O.M. artwork)

IT: Ivan N. Turist, N.O.M. showman & lead vocalist. "Who, "according to himself, "does not speak" (in interviews).

AK: Andrei Kagadeev, N.O.M.'s bass player, co-singer and lyricist (Arrives somewhat later).

Y: Yngvar B. Steinholt, interviewer.

The interview was conducted with pen and notebook. While we wait for Kagadeev, Kopeikin finishes his painting of the sinister 'Uglevik' (Coalman), and commences work upon the no less sinister 'Snegovik' (Snowman) in an Ukrainian coalmine. He introduces the artistic project he shares with the musical collective N.O.M.zhir as follows:

NK: N.O.M. will soon launch their new movie 'Paseka' ('The Bee Farm'). It is both a Russian 'X-files' and a musical black comedy.¹ On the role-list are Ivan Turist, Aleksandr Liver and Il'ia Polomodov. We have a new artistic formation going, by name of 'Kolkhui' (KOLdovskie KHUdozhnikI, roughly: 'sorcerer-artists')². The goal of the Kolkhui is to disenchant people who live in illusions and we aim to do that by way of art and science. The most important target in our fight against illusions are the two predominant illusions of contemporary Russia:

-The belief in happiness

-The belief in professionalism

It is of the highest importance to show people that there is no happy life. It has never been and will never be, neither in Russia, nor anywhere else in the world, just like there are no professionals in Russia or any other country. The notion of professionalism is no less than plain stupidity. In painting, the Kolkhuí are close to the primitivists, the first ever contemporary classics of primitive modernism.

1. 'Paseka' was released on VHS in winter 2002 immediately after its movie theatre premiere.

2. The word 'khui' is the plural form of the vulgar Russian expression for the male sexual organ and a much-used swearword.

Y: Is it me or does this sound like some sort of post-modern avantgarde?

NK: Well, of course, but many see post modernism merely as a variant of modernism. We are interested in everything from impressionism onwards, including post modernism. We want to make primitivist versions of Malevich's squares. The leading force of this direction in Kolkhuí activities is Nikolai Kopeikin. In addition we have projects in cinema and music. We have to scare people in order to fight their illusions. [AK arrives, NK lets him take over].

AK: N.O.M. is a movement of and for pure art. It is not because of money, but because we enjoy what we do. A consequence of our artistic activity is that we can sell things to those who want to buy them and play gigs for our friends. [unlike with other St. Petersburg bands, several N.O.M. records are actually sold out and not re-distributed, which contributes to the bands cult status].

Y: The question of how to identify 'russianness' in the works of St. Petersburg bands is something I find intriguing. The late Sergei Kurekhin once said that there are no differences between any European form of culture and the corresponding Russian form but two things: foulness and madness. N.O.M.'s manysided activities do hardly bear witness to foulness, but what about madness?

AK: Those who are mad are those who take themselves seriously. The professionals. They want to do everything like in Hollywood – theirs is the restaurant culture. And in their ranks, you'll also find those who drank themselves to Russian Orthodox Christianity. Between the current public opinion and N.O.M. there is a glass wall of mutual lack of understanding. What we do is living folklore, a contemporary folklore that was formed in the times of the Soviet Union. We use a lot of primary school folklore. All the stories, tall-tales, legends, table-stories, quotes from movies - everything was thought out during the Soviet era. The musical works of N.O.M. lean on our literary classics: Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gogol, Kharms. The absurd atmosphere of N.O.M. originates in the dawn of the 20th century. A very important writer for us is Andrei Platonov. He founded a new literary language, not any artificial 'novoiiaz', but a morphologic language, of immense importance to the art of N.O.M.

Y: Which Russian bands have influenced the work of N.O.M.?

AK/IT: The groups where our keyboard player Nikolai Gusev played earlier: Avia and Strannye igry and Zvuki mu, or rather their main man Petr Mamonov.

Y: Aukcyon?

AK: Yes, but not from the very beginning. Their early works had very little influence on us, but the band grew. Their musicians, the drummer and others, have contributed to N.O.M. recordings. They also make music, not show-business, and that is very important. And Aukcyon have a unique working atmosphere – it is a very good collective.

Y: Thinking of possible western sources of influences on N.O.M., I find it hard to avoid The Residents...

AK: We find them interesting, not only because they have done most admirable works in much the same direction as we, but also because of the many parallels between our bands on other levels than the artistic. We heard about The Residents first time in 1990. We met Miller and he showed us some recordings of theirs. Even in the way our bands were named there is a parallel. Residents, reputedly, sent a demo tape to Warner Brothers, and since they hadn't yet decided what to name the band, they left only their address in the envelope. The returned tape was addressed to 'Residents at...' and they kept the name. With us it happened like this:

One day in winter 1987 Aleksandr Liver went to the rock club to register our band, but we hadn't agreed on a name yet and he just put down a term that was much used by the press at the time [to describe rock bands and other forms of unofficial youth groupings]: N.O.M. (Neformal'noe Ob'edinenie Molodezhi – Informal Youth Society). The organisers thought this was the name of the band and we adopted it. We thought it came out as a good gag.

Y: Did any other Western bands have something to offer you by way of inspiration?

AK: In the 70s we listened to hard rock: King Crimson, Deep Purple. The Soviet estrada gave us a wide range of cliches to pick from. More importantly, however, we had a very good period of musical experiments in Leningrad in the early 80s, that is before *Red Wave* [1986]. Russian rock was a dilettantish phenomenon and 90% of the bands disappeared with the loss of interest in rock in the late 80s and early 90s, and with the emergence of the new mass culture. It's easier for man to walk down from a hill than to climb it. Therefore the onslaught of cheap mass culture resulted in a general vulgarisation of culture. As a sad consequence, the interest in culture is dropping in this country. Bad taste reigns everywhere because it is finally legalised. Literature and music suffer. The 'Russian chanson,' for example, is a genre of absolute emptiness.

NK: Our leaders have worked hard to make us believe that the Chechens are a people of 'bandits', but if they are, so are we. Our authorities have themselves begun to speak in bandit or jail jargon. One deputy of the Duma recently addressed the People of the Russian Federation to thank them for not having 'turned our fatherland in.' It's plain convict jargon!

Y: What consequences have you seen after Putin's 'reforms' in the media sector?

AK: That there are no alternatives any more is clearly felt. Everything has become the same, be it RTR, ORT or NTV, you are fed the same 'pills'.

Y: Returning to N.O.M.: It started in 1987?

AK: You could say 1986-87. A friend of mine and I began playing and we invited Aleksandr Liver to join us. In the beginning we met once a week and during week-ends. Turist emerged somewhat later. We invited him to join us as a showman in '89 or '90. (It is correct that he was hospitalised at the time after being beaten up by some hooligans, but the version that it caused him to appear in the band is utter hogwash). Turist was in the same class at school as Liver for ten years. My brother was also a classmate of theirs and me and my band-founding friend were classmates too. That's how we came together. In the beginning my brother and Liver did the

singing and Turist was the showman. He played different roles on stage. After my brother left with the project Euro-N.O.M. in 1996, Turist started singing as well. And because he has no good singing voice he sings all the more intensely and plays the role of a hyper-energetic failure. The energy of his effort compensates for the lack of musical talent and it turns out fine. We have already recorded four albums with him as lead-singer.

Y: But Liver is a professional singer? (Ouch, there I said it!)

AK: What kind of professional?! He's an optician-engineer! He sings the bass in the Nevskii Theatre choir. They took him in because he had the voice material and the talent, but he has an engineer diploma from LITMO. After that he went to a music school and followed a jazz-course for a couple of years. He was married to a French woman and she helped us by organising gigs for us in France. We have also toured Germany quite a lot. We had an accident there with our tour-bus. It did a roll right in the middle of the Autobahn (sad story, it was a nice bus). Fortunately nobody were seriously hurt. We were impressed at how helpful the German police was. You would never have seen anything like that here.

Y: The new album 'Ochen' Otlichnyi Koncert', how would you describe it to a total outsider?

AK: Firstly, it is not a live album. The title is yet another example of folklore: In our provinces, people for some reason used the term 'concert', meaning an album: 'You heard the new Zeppelin concert yet?' would not refer to a gig, but any recording, be it studio or live. It's just good old jargon. Aleksandr Liver has always been our main composer, but Gusev's influence has increased lately through his arrangements. Now that we are fewer the contributions of each member has become more clearly distinguishable (earlier we were 8 people who spent almost all spare time together. We spent 8 hours a day on music, rehearsals, composing).

NK: But the lyrics are still Andrei's work.