

1. M.D. They call you a legend of Russian rock. You belong to the generation of 1980s, oftentimes labeled the "Golden Age" of Russian rock. But what is "Russian rock" to you -- a certain unique style or simply the rock music made in Russia or post-Soviet territories? Or is it rock music with Russian lyrics? How would you define it today? What did "Russian rock" mean back in the early 80s? Was the term even used back then, by musicians and/or by music lovers? And how did the meaning of this term change (if it changed) from the beginning of your career?

M.B. It's an interesting story of an old term losing its original meaning. I'd better start from the 80s. Back then, still in the Soviet times, there was a real confrontation between official VIAs ("Vocal Instrumental Ensembles") that performed songs by professional songwriters, members of the Soviet Composers Union, and amateur, non-professional rock bands that played their own songs. Amateur bands were gathered in so called Rock Clubs under the control of local Houses of Amateur Performers. So in the early eighties, we were in opposition to those professionals and some of the independent journalists called us "the bands playing Russian rock". I never considered myself Russian rock musician. I was just playing rock music with Russian lyrics. But then after the Soviet Union collapsed this term started to obtain another meaning. Now it was used to define mainstream rock with Russian lyrics, losing its protest connotation entirely. And what's funny, in the late 90s this term got a new synonym – "ГОВНОРОК" or "shit rock" – used by many of us. So a lot of independent musicians nowadays consider Russian rock "shit rock", music with banal structure and pathos lyrics. Although, official press still names all rock music with Russian lyrics Russian rock.

2. Trent Reznor with his band Nine Inch Nails was one of the first to start playing harder-edge electronic dark wave with philosophical self-reflecting lyrics. One could say the same thing about Televizor -- only you guys started about 5 years earlier. How did you manage to do it in the Soviet Union of the early 80s, when it was next to impossible to obtain even a decent quality guitar, not to mention a synthesizer, and information from beyond the Iron Curtain was rather scarce, to say the least?

I like Trent Reznor but it's a funny comparison. Talking about self-reflecting lyrics, I can say that I was inspired by Russian poetry of 19th and 20th centuries, from Lermontov to Balmont, Blok, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam and Brodsky, and there was a lot of self-reflection in their poetry. Moreover, social depression of early eighties in the Soviet Union was a perfect background for dark lyrics. And since I was a fan of new wave electronic music, I tried to put together all my musical and poetical addictions. I was one of the western music hunters: I put a lot of energy to get new information and new records from behind the Iron Curtain with a help of my friends and their parents who were permitted to go abroad, or on the black market. I couldn't afford buying the vinyl records that cost an average month salary, so I had to make copies on my tape recorder. That's how I discovered The Cure, Depeche Mode, David Bowie, Japan and a lot more.

There was a big problem to find synthesizers and electronic drums in the USSR. So we were experimenting with a lot of hand-made electronic devices, rather primitive but authentic. For example, we stole mics from the handsets of the street telephone booths to make electronic drums. And we also used one the first soviet synthesizers, Estradin, which was manufactured by the military factory somewhere in Siberia. During our first album record session we shared one synthesizer KORG Poly 800 with four other bands. We borrowed it from the restaurant musicians who earned a lot of money back then.

That's the way it started. A strange mixture of young energy and the blind attempts to create something unique.

3. Since your band was a member of Leningrad Rock Club, which was overseen by KGB, you needed to submit your songs' lyrics to the club committee for an approval, in order to be permitted to perform them in public, just like all other bands did. However, it's a well-known story that when some of your songs were censored-out you decided to play them never the less, resulting in Televizor being banned from performing at the Rock Club's events -- officially the first such case in the history of the Soviet underground rock. Another legendary story -- you leading a thousand-strong march to Smolny, the St. Petersburg's "City Hall" to oppose them cancelling a rock festival. Can you please expand on these stories a little bit? And, in relation to this -- what role did rock music play in political and social protest back in the 80s and how did this role change over time?

We were banned from performing throughout the USSR for a year in 1986 after we played two censored out songs at the Leningrad Rock Club festival. Few days before the festival, we were asked not to play these songs because the Communist Party officials found the lyrics too seditious. I discussed it with the band members, and we decided to take the risk. And it was worth it, because a year after the censorship was largely abolished. We tested its limits and we survived.

Talking about the "March of Dissenters" to the St Petersburg' City Hall, I remember that one day before the rock festival in 1987, I was told that it was canceled due to the fire security issues (as the officials put it). But we all knew the real reasons were political. So I thought the only way to save the situation was to organize some kind of protest march. I went out to the street near the concert hall and started informing people who came to buy tickets that the festival was cancelled and we needed to do something about it. After a while, more than 100 people started moving with me in the direction of the City Hall. And in an hour, we were several thousand because a lot of passers-by joined us. I was surprised. When we arrived to Smolny, we were stopped by the police and started the negotiations. In an hour, it was settled. The authorities gave up and the festival took place the day after. For us it was a small yet inspiring victory. In the eighties, rock music was kind of officially prohibited genre in the USSR and I was so tired or hypocrisy and pressure of the Soviet system. So playing rock music was like fighting for freedom for me. It was kind of symbol of new life without restrictions in the way you dressed, the way you talked, and the way you thought. It was the liberation from Soviet dogmas and an attempt to join the rest of the civilized world. It was a romantic time. Later in the 1990s, rock music became part of the mainstream and lost its political influence. It became conformist.

4. There's a popular idea that Soviet underground rock music was instrumental in bringing down the Iron Curtain and eventually in collapsing the Soviet Union while your band Televizor was one of the most notable "anti-Soviet" bands. So, when the Revolution has won and the USSR stopped existence in 1991, what happened next? When did you start realizing that this train was moving in the wrong direction?

I'm not sure whether we were big enough to bring down the Iron Curtain. Of course, millions of young people listened to our music then and came to see our concerts all over the country. We breathed the same air and felt the same wind of change. After 1991, it seemed to me that we had chosen the right path and there was no need to worry about our future, but I was wrong. For the next 10 years, we tried to build the new free Russia without totalitarian ideology, without censorship and imperialistic pattern of behavior, with open borders. It was not an easy time for a lot of Russians because people had to find themselves in this new economic reality. It was the reason for a certain kind of irritation in the society and many started dreaming of a "strong hand". That's why Putin came to power. Besides, he managed to finish the intense phase of military confrontation in Chechnya. And in 2001, when he destroyed one of the biggest television companies, NTV, it was clear that something was going wrong. By 2004, when two more TV companies were closed and Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested and Putin won the elections, I realized that we were moving backwards to the Soviet times. And then there followed 13 years of Putin's way to absolute power.

5. You are well-known for your anti-clerical views, being in stark contrast to some of your fellow Russian rockers openly declaring their religiousness. Some go as far as labeling you “anti-religious”, or “богоборец”, to use the Russian word. However, judging by your lyrics, you’re not exactly an atheist. So, what is “faith” and “religion” to you? And what do you think about the churching, “воцерковлённость”, which became so trendy among many Russian rockers today?

I think that faith is a kind of energy any person can use to achieve some of their goals. So this is just an instrument. And religion for me is a dogmatic system of perception of the actual reality. So I’m not into it. I can call myself an agnostic because I cannot take the existence of any god for granted. Although I don’t deny a mystical knowledge. Talking about some of my Russian colleagues who demonstrate their churching, I can say that it looks almost absurd to me because I always thought that rock’n’roll is freedom and one cannot be free living without doubts. And religion is not the best place for doubts. And I feel sorry for religious Russian rockers. Now they are getting more and more aggressive to the ideas they fought for when they were young. It scares me.

6. Rock music was traditionally thought to be rebellious, although not always in a direct political sense, and its social awareness is only typical, including your own songs. However, by the very rare exception today's Russian rockers are apolitical at best, while many are actually loyal to the government. What is it -- their fear to be denied access to media, concert venues, etc. or they genuinely believe that things are moving the right way? What do you think?

Sometimes they think that they are too genius to care about politics. But when they face the reality, the fear of being denied appears. So they choose conformism. As they say, politics and art must not have anything in common, and this idea is rather popular in Russia nowadays. I think it’s like trying to get rid of one part of your own brain to feel comfortable, self-lobotomy.

7. You have recently obtained a temporary refuge in Sweden and in a sense can be perceived as a political exile. Has the situation really reached the state of being when a person holding such beliefs as you do can no longer live and create in Russia? And, in relation to this -- let’s play Nostradamus: what is the future of Russian protest movement? Does it even have a future? And, to expand it further -- what do you think will happen to Russian rock and the country at large?

I took part in various political activities – Marches of Dissenters, protest concerts and festivals, opposition conferences, etc. for 10 years, from 2007 to 2017. Three years ago, I realized that I was in desperate need of fresh air, because after Russia started the war against Ukraine a lot of my friends were infected with imperialistic Russian propaganda and I had to break relations with them. It was one of the biggest disappointments in my life. So I decided that I needed a break from my motherland to watch it from the distance. Of course I can perform in small clubs in Russia, but it’s not easy to be creative when the hybrid civil war is going on in your country and you got no power to win. Protest, like everything else around, has a wave structure. It’s a new young wave now and I’m sure there will be a lot more. Russian rock will surely transform to some music that has sincere energy in it. It will have another name, and another cycle will start. And the same can happen to Russia – it may have another name, size, new energy and new journey but it’s a long way to go.

8. Your personal and creative plans: what's going to happen when the time of your temporary stay in the West is up?

My future is very, very uncertain. So I stand in the threshold of the new period. A mystery has appeared in my life again, and I like it.