

## THE ROCK INUNDATION

*by S. Frederick Starr*

In 1946, Winston Churchill declared that an Iron Curtain was descending on Europe, dividing East from West. The metaphor was apt.

As Stalin saw it, the curtain of isolation had two functions. First, it was to shelter the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the disruptive influence of the West. Second, it was to provide a secure environment in which ordinary mortals could be transformed into exemplars of the New Soviet Man.

It never worked this way. Russians, being a resourceful people, found countless ways of drilling at least small holes through the barriers separating them from the West. Through these breaches, they informed themselves on everything from science and technology to modern art, from Harold Robbins to Andy Warhol. Many Soviet citizens became quite capable of forming their own opinions on issues, rather than simply accepting the government's view on the Great Questions of the Day.

Of all foreign influences, those that Soviet leaders feared most emanated from the United States. The fear was justified. It was precisely the United States about which the Soviet public was most curious and from which it was most eager to borrow. In spite of an official Soviet campaign of vituperation, the United States after 1945 emerged in Russian minds as the most pertinent model for their own country's development. For all its power, the Soviet state was unable to dissuade large parts of the educated public from this view.

Soviet popular culture, dominated as it was by American taste and fashion, provides some particularly vivid examples. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, millions of Soviet youths were raised on jazz. So strong was the public's attachment to what the government called "the music of spiritual poverty" that jazz could not be repressed. It had to be co-opted. And so Komsomol, the Communist youth organization, opened jazz clubs across the Soviet Union. For several years during the 1960s, it looked as if this unruly music had been tamed.

But then the public's taste in music suddenly shifted. The government once again found itself in the position of following rather than forming public values. By 1973, Moscow jazz critic Arkadii Petrov could observe ruefully that "Rock has invaded



*The Leningrad rock group, Aquarium. The present young adult generation is the first to share fully in European and American popular culture.*

the big cities where jazz festivals used to be held, while jazz festivals have moved to small towns. . . ."

Rock music had indeed taken over. The throb of electric guitars was heard where avant-garde free jazz had recently reigned. Songs of reckless desire, broken hearts, and broken lives replaced the abstract improvisations of hard bop. The modern jazz revolution of the late 1950s had been swept aside by the music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder, and the Shadows.

A hint of the change in popular taste was evident as early as 1957 at the VI World Youth Festival in Moscow. Many of the visiting performers shocked the Russians with their bizarre dress and offensive music. The journal *Soviet Culture* received more than a few letters complaining about the foreigners' "stiliagi jackets, trousers, and wild haircuts," and songs like "Crazy Rhythm" and "Rock 'n' Roll."\* None of the letter-writers was quite sure whether rock 'n' roll was a song or a style of music, but it certainly was not good. Another early public performance

\**Stiliagi*, meaning style-seeking or, more loosely, beatnik.

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of rock music in the USSR was in a 1958 theatrical scene representing Hell. And when in 1960 Igor Moiseev's renowned folk-dance troupe worked up a satire on American rock music, it was titled "Back to the Monkeys." Poor Moiseev must have been thunderstruck when Moscow audiences burst into applause at the rambunctious music and remained indifferent to the satire.

In the West, rock music was still in its infancy. Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel" and "Hound Dog" were hit songs in the United States only the year before the Moscow Youth Festival. Yet recordings of these works, not to mention hits by Chubby Checker and Bill Haley, were available even in the Russian provinces within the year, reproduced on x-ray plates. The youth of Khrushchev's Russia soaked up the new music like blotters. Working-class Soviet youngsters were especially receptive. The long-haired imitators of the Beatles who appeared in the provincial city of Petrozavodsk late in 1964 were proletarian *stiliagi*, failing students and dropouts, to whom "making it" seemed a futile, and certainly an uninspiring, dream.

### Little Red Devils

Access to the new fashion was even less of a problem after 1967, when the Voice of America inaugurated a program devoted to rock and soul music. The growth of tourism and student exchanges opened unprecedented channels for acquiring the latest recordings by Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, the Jefferson Airplane, and others. But finding instruments on which to play the new music was as difficult as it had been for Soviet jazz musicians during the 1920s. Electric guitars were not produced in the Soviet Union. They were, however, manufactured in Poland and East Germany, and exchange students from those countries did a thriving underground business at universities and technical institutes. Guitars sold for 300 to 400 rubles (then equivalent to about \$330 to \$440) during the 1960s, and

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amplifiers—provided they were available—for 1,000 rubles. In 1966, the East German government opened in Moscow a store called Leipzig, offering 10 electric guitars for sale on its first business day. All were sold within minutes to blackmarketers and resold at a 200 percent markup.

Some guitarists built their own equipment. A young Moscow rock musician named Yuri Valov consulted electrician friends, copied published photographs, and “followed straight logic” to construct his own guitar and amplifier. Demand was so great that unofficial manufacturers set up shop in many Soviet cities. Tens of thousands of instruments were produced in the private “second economy” and distributed through the black market. Many of the guitars were terrible, but a few were of exceptionally high quality. Gena Kolmakov, a black-market manufacturer in Odessa, copied Fender and Marshall instruments so beautifully, adding improvements in the process, that foreign musicians visiting Odessa on cruise ships would exchange the genuine articles for his forgeries.

Rock music was, of course, officially banned by the regime, and when the Beatles craze hit Russia during the mid-1960s, efforts to reinforce the ban were strengthened. These efforts backfired disastrously. By reinforcing the sense of generational confinement on which rock music fed, the prohibition created a vital underground culture, featuring such groups as the Eagle, the Guys, the Little Red Devils, the Scythians, and the Melomanes. Most of these bands were organized by students to play for dances at technical institutes and universities, but they all gradually turned professional.

### **Cultivating Deviance**

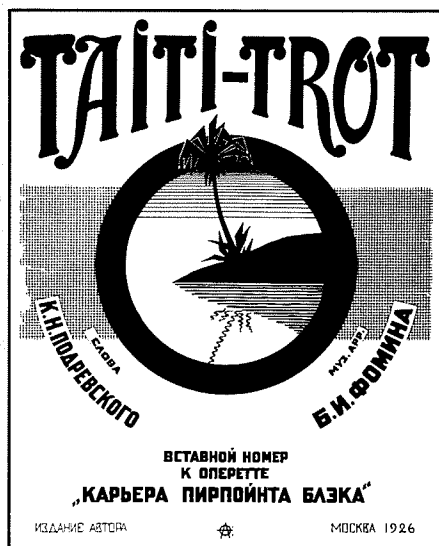
Scores of new rock bands sprang up in the Moscow region every year, but Moscow was by no means the rock capital of the Soviet Union. Baku was several years ahead of Moscow, according to musicians familiar with both cities. Musicians in Riga, Tallinn, and the major cities in the Caucasus were equally quick to take up the latest fashions in rock. All Soviet rock groups during the late 1960s reflected the strong influence of British bands. Cliff Richards’s Shadows were as popular as the Beatles, and the Dakotas and the Animals followed closely behind.

In fact, an Animals’ recording provided the name for one of the best Moscow rock bands of the period, the Winds of Change. Sasha Lehrman was an 18-year-old cello student at the distinguished Gnesin School of Music in Moscow when he became the group’s leader in 1967. He and four other cellists at the school—

two of them promising students of Mstislav Rostropovich—had earlier formed a rock group so successful that Lehrman decided to turn professional. Members of the Winds of Change wrote most of their own lyrics. Their subjects were the classic themes of love and loss, sung with an honesty and sincerity long absent from products of the official music industry. “We were political by being unpolitical,” recalled Lehrman.

Numerous bands, including the Winds of Change, sang many of their lyrics in English. Besides testifying to the Soviet educational system’s commendable emphasis on foreign languages, the practice was a deliberate affront to the older generation. Among the young, English was a cult language, like Latin for the educated of much earlier generations. Terms such as “underground,” “bit grupa,” “rock bend,” “grupi,” and “sashon” (i.e., session, meaning any rock event) came into general usage. Many Soviet rock groups even wrote their original lyrics in English.

The world of rock encouraged “social deviance” as an end in itself. Marijuana and alcohol were common in the rock underground, although hard drugs were rare outside Moscow. Men sported long hair and pleated bell-bottom trousers ornamented with gold buttons down the outer seams; neckties, required of all male students, were abandoned in favor of gaudy open-necked shirts with strings of beads showing. Women wore



*As early as the 1920s, young people in the Soviet Union had turned away from “dull, deadly, and gray” official music, preferring Western imports like Vincent Youman’s “Tea for Two,” which Dmitri Shostakovich arranged as a fox trot for orchestra called “Tahiti Trot.”*

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miniskirts, loose hair, and heavy eye make-up. Every major city acquired sleazy hangouts for the local rock 'n' roll set.

The cultivation of purposeful deviance and outright rebellion among Soviet youth reached a new high with the appearance during the late 1970s of aggressively antisocial punk and heavy metal bands. Such groups deliberately assaulted respectable society with garish costumes, ferocious volume, and obscene lyrics. Most cities managed to stamp out the more offensive bands, but punk groups appeared with some frequency at dances at Batumi and other Black Sea resorts. The nearby Georgian Republic was far more tolerant of rock music than was the Russian Republic, and a number of fairly provocative bands like the Varazi flourished there.

#### Armenia's "Woodstock"

The combination of enormous public demand and ineffectual official opposition enabled rock music to develop a complex and efficient organizational network. At the center stood a group of private entrepreneurs, the "organizers" (*organizatori*), who formed bands, booked concerts, and accumulated large bankrolls. A few of these promoters were themselves musicians, including a grandson of Presidium member Anastas Mikoyan, who founded the popular and successful band, the Flowers. Most were pure impresarios. Typical was Yuri Eisenspitz, the organizer, manager, and financier of the popular Moscow rock band, the Eagle. Clean-shaven, conservatively dressed, and entirely conformist in appearance, the young Eisenspitz is said to have made a fortune in the unofficial market in furs. His real love was putting together rock events.

To stage the events, Eisenspitz and other organizers took advantage of opportunities to rent the cafés and restaurants that the government makes available cheaply for weddings and anniversary parties. The budget for a typical evening might include: 400 rubles for the hall, 300 rubles for the band, and 500 rubles for food and liquor (purchased in the semilegal "second economy" at bargain prices). To offset these expenses, an organizer might charge 10 rubles a head and expect 200 people, yielding 800 rubles profit, the equivalent of several months' wages for a typical Soviet worker. Eisenspitz deemed it prudent to hire two burly bodyguards to accompany him on his rounds.

To avoid entanglements with the police, promoters like Eisenspitz preferred to stage their events on the outskirts of big cities, at suburban cafés such as the Northern near Moscow. There were police raids from time to time, although until the

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late 1960s and early '70s they rarely led to jailings. Indeed, the situation was sufficiently loose and lucrative to attract far more daring impresarios than Eisenspitz. The unquestioned king of Soviet rock entrepreneurs, the Bill Graham of the USSR, was an Armenian, Rafail Mkrtchian. When he burst on the rock scene, "Rafik" Mkrtchian was in his early 40s and balding. Temperamental and shrewd, he remains a shadowy figure, even to those who worked for him. "I never asked about [his background], he never volunteered," recalled Sasha Lehrman.

Particularly murky are Mkrtchian's dealings with Komso-mol in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. Presumably through Mkrtchian's efforts, the Young Communist officials were talked into lending their organization's name to the annual Festival of Rock Music, the first of which he mounted in Yerevan in 1969. For several years, the event was an annual Soviet Woodstock, attended by 5,000–8,000 people daily over several weekends.

Each winter, Mkrtchian scoured the Soviet Union for the best bands and personally invited them to participate in his May festival at Yerevan's Palace of Sports. The events were well advertised locally on billboards, but the rest of the Soviet citizenry learned of the festival only by word of mouth. The musicians dealt exclusively with Mkrtchian. Participating bands came from Moscow, Leningrad, Latvia, Estonia, and Georgia. Their performances were completely free of control by the Repertory Commission or other censors. Thanks to Mkrtchian's protection, Armenia became the Mecca of Soviet rock music.

### Cracking Down

The parallels between Mkrtchian's Armenian rock festivals and the Woodstock festival were deliberate, although the former were infinitely more sedate. Mkrtchian even attempted to produce a film of the Armenian Woodstock in 1972. Four of the biggest rock stars in the Soviet Union formed a new group for the occasion. Leonid Berger, formerly of the Orpheus band, played piano and sang in the style of his idol, Ray Charles. The bassist and the guitarist came from the Scythians, while Yuri Fokin, soon to enter an Orthodox Christian monastery but for the time being the best rock drummer in Russia, provided rhythm. The film was produced but never released. Mkrtchian, it seems, had failed to share enough of his profits with Armenian officials. He was jailed for 10 years. Musicians who played in the 1972 festival were interrogated. Eisenspitz and other successful promoters were rounded up as well.

Rock music had gotten out of hand, and most attempts to

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curb it were too primitive to be effective. In Leningrad, however, a crisis in 1967 led to a "solution" that was widely emulated elsewhere. One of the most popular local rock bands, the Argonauts, had been engaged to perform at the Polytechnic Institute. The hall was packed with students and rock fans, among whom word had spread that this was to be a wild evening. The fans drank vodka and smoked marijuana in the hall. When the Argonauts performed, a few fans attacked the stage and began shouting and grabbing the musicians. The incident led to a special session of the City Committee of the Communist Party and a decree asserting official control over all vocal-guitar bands in Leningrad. Amateur groups were forbidden to perform in public until they had passed official censorship at the House of Public Creativity. The Leningrad Artistic Council was made directly accountable to the local party.

### **The Turning Point**

The ensuing effort at co-optation penetrated even to the high schools. In 1968, a group of 10th graders at Special English School No. 185 in Leningrad wanted to form a rock band modeled on the Beatles. They were permitted to do so and were even invited to participate in a citywide competition of rock bands run by the Palace of Pioneers. But a special instructor would arrive periodically at the school to check on the band's repertoire. Not only did he review the entire tune list and select songs that were appropriate for the competition, but he provided succinct critical advice, such as "This is too loud," or "This part is too Western." In spite of all his efforts, the final competition, held in the spring of 1968 at the Palace of Pioneers and open only to Komsomol activists, included many long-haired musicians playing pure Western-style rock music.

A more sinister form of surveillance was exercised in Moscow. The most serious attempt to exert official control over rock in the capital came with the creation of the Beat Club at Moscow's Melody and Rhythm Café in 1969. Komsomol was its nominal sponsor. In reality, it was a KGB operation from the outset. Many of the best rock musicians in the capital were enticed onto the new club's board, which then announced that it would hold open auditions for members. Promises of concerts, imported instruments and amplifiers, and foreign tours produced a long waiting list of those wishing to register. But registration was no simple matter. It involved filling out a long questionnaire touching on every aspect of the applicant's biography. Still, the applications flowed in. Once registration was



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completed, however, the club's activities began to dwindle. One band was sent on tour to Africa and the Middle East, but suspicions grew among the musicians. When the Beat Club was finally disbanded a year later, everyone was disenchanted except the KGB, which had acquired full dossiers on hundreds of the best rock musicians of Greater Moscow.

This devious episode did not quell the underground rock movement, but it did mark a turning point. Henceforth, rock music became a major concern of Komsomol and the state-run variety agencies. In order to pre-empt the private market, salary ceilings for officially approved musicians were raised enormously. With most of the "organizers" in jail, the leading stars bought off, and the Armenian Woodstock shut down, rock music appeared to have been neutralized by 1972.

#### **"Rah, Rah, Rasputin"**

But consumer preferences didn't change. The better rock musicians understood this and tried to stay close to the public's tastes. The Singing Guitars of Leningrad, one of the first official rock groups to appear, succeeded by borrowing heavily from the repertoires and styles of the unofficial groups. Not all official rock musicians felt the need to respond to their audiences, however. After all, the state concert agencies, not the public, directly paid their salaries. Therefore, it was only the bureaucrats who had to be pleased. The Blue Guitars, a commercial outfit under the Moscow Concert Agency, gradually evolved into a bland and old-fashioned variety show. Igor Granov, their businessman-organizer, mixed Russian folk tunes and maudlin ballads with the band's other numbers by the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. Conservative officials liked the act and sent the group on tour to Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America.

For every polished official group like the Blue Guitars, there were dozens that turned to mush under the combined pressures of commercialism, official prudery, and freedom from competition. The Happy Guys were formed in 1968 to present an image of healthy Soviet youths to young audiences. They were a study in officially sponsored prissiness from the start, even though the group boasted several very capable musicians and an eclectic repertoire including many Western tunes. The Balladeers from Minsk were similar, although their use of folk instruments led them down original paths, and their greater distance from Moscow permitted them to be slightly bolder in setting their own course.

The government's commitment to détente during the 1970s

complicated its effort to control rock music. As a sign of improved diplomatic relations with the West, a number of American and European rock bands were permitted to tour the USSR. New York's Joffrey Ballet brought along a small rock group called the Vegetables on their 1975 tour, and the following year the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band performed a foot-stomping blend of rock and country music while on a cross-country tour. In Yerevan, 6,000 fans clapped and danced inside the hall where they performed, while another 15,000 without tickets surged against the outside gates until they were dispersed by police tear gas. Rhythm-and-blues star B. B. King's 1979 tour received no advance publicity but produced hordes of ticket scalpers in every city, as well as a near-riot in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, where two people sat in each seat in the theater.

By the late 1970s, the Soviet bureaucracy had accepted rock music as an unavoidable social reality. Officially sponsored rock festivals were held in various parts of the country, the Estonians taking the lead with the Muusikapäevad in 1979 and the Tartu rock festival in 1980. Lyrics were still closely censored, and anything resembling pornography forbidden. The government tried to foster homegrown tunes drawing on nationalistic subjects. Rock was even exploited for anti-Western propaganda.

Official Soviet efforts to control popular music did succeed in buying off a few rock stars, but at the price of hardening the line between the official and unofficial and of confirming underground groups as the standard-bearers of heroic independence. Foreign influences continued to prevail: In 1979, Bob Dylan's album *Blood on the Tracks* was bringing 150 rubles on the black market in Moscow, more in the provinces. When the British rock group Boney M came to Moscow, it was forbidden to play its big hit, "Rah, Rah, Rasputin, Russia's Greatest Love Machine." Yet within a week, the house band at the rustic Saisare Restaurant in the remote Siberian city of Yakutsk was using its new synthesizer to perform the tune, over and over again. For all their efforts to guide popular taste, Soviet officials were still unable to do more than respond to the vital private market.

