

Soviet West: Estonian *estrada* in the Soviet Union

by Aimar Ventsel

Abstract

In the last one and a half decades of the Soviet Union, Estonian pop and rock artists suddenly gained popularity on a Soviet national level. The number of these artists was limited, but they had a huge impact and are still well known in the former Soviet Union. The success of Estonian artists had many reasons. One of them was the Soviet cultural politics of light entertainment music. This type of music served both educational and leisure purposes. Another reason was the political situation of the time. Soviet citizens gained more access to western cultural products, including pop music. In this context, Estonian pop music was seen as a domestic replacement for western music. And last but not least, Estonian artists took the opportunity to travel, to make money and to get famous

Keywords: estrada, VIA, Estonian invasion, Soviet West, informal music industry.

This paper¹ analyzes a little studied aspect of Soviet Estonian culture. The 1970s and 1980s were a period of extreme popularity for Estonian light pop music (*estrada*) all over the Soviet Union. Artists like Jaak Joala, Anne Veski or Gunnar Graps as well as bands like *Apelsin* or *Fix* are today still well known to people over 40 inside the former Soviet republics. In my paper I discuss the reason and mechanism for their success. Within the strict Soviet cultural framework existed a pop culture that manipulated categories and structures of the official “workers’ culture”. First of all, Estonia was the Soviet west and Soviet culture managers in Goskontsert and other state organizations promoted that image in order to create popular stadium artists. Estonian artists were encouraged not to sing in Russian and appear as if they were western pop stars. This way Estonian music was manipulated as a substitute for western pop music in order to satisfy demand for western music. Last but not least, the success of Estonian artists was a product of the

¹ I am grateful to all musicians for their interviews and Boris Belge and Sergei I. Zhuk for their invaluable comments and support. This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory CECT) and by the institutional research funding IUT34-32 of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

informal music industry in the Soviet Union. Every successful Estonian artist had one or multiple informal managers who used their contacts to get maximum airplay in key musical programs of Soviet central TV channels and as many big concerts as possible. The article shows that a profit-oriented music business existed in the Soviet Union that operated within the framework of the socialist cultural institutions.

* * *

As soon as the taxi driver in the former capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty, heard where I came from he started to complain: “For a long time I have been looking for a song of Tõnis Mägi but they do not play it. Never.” And he hummed me a melody I was unable to recognize. This happened in March 2012 and was not the first time in a former Soviet republic where I encountered the fame and popularity of Estonian artists and their music during the Soviet era. As a matter of fact I was not exactly surprised. Since the mid-1990s, when I began my research in Russian Siberia and the Far East, I constantly met people who associated my Estonian origin with the once famous singers such as Jaak Joala, Tõnis

Mägi or Anne Veski.

The short period between the mid-seventies and the end of perestroika in the late 1980s which some of my informants call “the invasion of Estonian music”² is generally neglected in academic and popular writing, both in Estonia and abroad. In the few works that discuss Soviet popular and underground music, the topic is mainly associated with Russian music, and precisely with the music from the central cities of Moscow and Leningrad.³ The western academic interest in Soviet era music culture, especially the late Soviet period, seems to focus on rock as an ambivalent semi-illegal music culture that embodies resistance to the socialist mass culture.⁴ This is the only context where Estonia is mentioned in English language articles – as a setting for the discussion

2 It is difficult to prove, but some of my informants believe that the term “Estonian invasion” was coined by the singer Ivo Linna in one of his interviews. However, the term is currently widely used especially with regard to Estonian Soviet era musicians and culture managers. [Interviews with Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011 and Väino Land, 4 December 2012.]

3 David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and Soviet Popular Song, 1955–1991*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001; David MacFadyen, *Estrada?! Grand Narratives and the Philosophy of the Russian Popular Songs since Perestroika*, Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002; Robert A Rothstein, “The Quiet Rehabilitation of the Brick Factory: Early Soviet Popular Music and Its Critics”, *Slavic Review* 39 (3), 1980, pp. 373–388; Michael Urban, *Russia Gets the Blues: Music, Culture, and Community in Unsettled Times*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004; one of the rare exceptions is the analysis of Soviet Ukrainian rock in Sergei I. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985*, Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press & Washington and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010.

4 Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia*, Albany: State University of New York, 1995; Julia P. Friedman and Adam Weiner, “Between A Rock and Hard Place: Holy Rus’ and its Alternatives in Russian Rock Music”, *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker, Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 110–137.

of the relatively liberal cultural shift where the first rock and jazz festivals were organized.⁵ This image of Soviet Estonia is also supported by numerous non-academic pieces. Russian rock journalist (and probably the only rock journalist of the Soviet Union) Artemii Troitskii characterizes Estonia as a rock paradise of the Soviet Union, where rock was played on the radio and gained full support from the local institutions of culture.⁶ However, other genres of popular music receive little or no attention in his book. In Estonia, the period of the “Estonian invasion” is also largely ignored, although for other reasons. Estonian artists, who in the 1980s performed in Russia, were often criticized in Estonia during the Soviet era, especially for singing in Russian. In many respects, these musicians were regarded as a form of “collaboration” with the Soviet authority. This explains why this aspect of culture in Soviet Estonia is rarely mentioned in the wave of autobiographies, biographies and nostalgic publications. The “Russian period” in Estonian language publications is extensively discussed only in two works.⁷ This article is a reflection on the research of work-in-process and draws on some very limited written resources but also on interviews conducted with former members of the Estonian bands *Fix* and *Apelsin*, and people related to the former Estonian Philharmony. Methodologically it combines anthropology and history to scrutinize the mechanisms of Soviet culture industry using Estonian artists as an example.

5 Urban, *Russia Gets the Blues*; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

6 Artemii Troitskii, *Back in the USSR*, Sankt-Peterburg: Amfora, 2007, p. 117.

7 Harri Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, Tallinn: Varrak, 2009; Vello Salumets, *Rockrapsoodia*, Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 1998.

Soviet culture industry

The term “culture industry” was developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in response to the notion that the music business is just a mechanism to make profit by establishing a coherent “mass culture” to “manufacture” quite tasteless music that people passively accept.⁸ It is possible that the skeptical sentiments of Adorno were shaped by his disillusionment with the development of “low art” in general and a dislike of jazz in particular.⁹ A strong antipathy to jazz and a critical view of the capitalist production of music was something that most Soviet ideologists and politicians of culture had in common with Adorno. The official understanding of Soviet culture was that it was not profit-oriented but had ideological goals to educate and entertain socialist people, a position that denied the existence of any kind of culture industry. However, by taking a closer look it seems that even in the framework of the ideological regulations and planned economy the existence of a culture industry cannot be dismissed.

The development of the Soviet Estonian entertainment music industry must be seen in the context of musical life in the whole of the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities were keen to provide “socialist fun”, but the details and meaning of how the “fun” should be constitut-

ed were unclear and ambiguous.¹⁰ First of all, it must be noted that in the Soviet Union there was no perceived difference between “high brow” and “low brow” music as was the case in the west. Moreover, it seems that the boundaries between musical genres have never been as clearly formulated as in the western market-oriented music business.¹¹ Opera and other genres of orchestrated classical music in the Soviet Union were accessible to the proletarian masses.¹² Composers like Shostakovich and Prokofiev were well known and listened to. Their music was not only taught in schools but even used in children’s cartoons. Furthermore, the border between “serious” folk and “light” entertainment music (which was later called *estrada*) remained blurry: orchestrated folk songs were in the repertoire of pop music performers, who often switched groups and styles between the “serious” and “light” genres. Simultaneously, in Soviet music it was not unusual for folk groups to adopt the *estrada* style to achieve more success and respectively re-arrange their songs to fit that genre.¹³ Unlike the western music business, there was also a lack of competition for recorded music. In the Soviet Union there was only one record company – Melodiia –, probably the biggest record company in world history. It released a chaotic multitude of different styles of music,

8 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner, Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 71-101.

9 Cited from Jay M. Bernstein, “Introduction”, *Theodor W. Adorno: The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, London and New York: Routledge, 1980, pp. 1-28; John Hutnyk, “At Womad: South Asian crossovers and the limits of hybridity talk”, *Postcolonial Studies* 1 (3), 1998, pp. 401-426; John Hutnyk, *Critique Of Exotica: Music, Politics, and the Culture Industry*, London: Pluto Press, 2000.

10 Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

11 Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Identities*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

12 Rothstein, “The Quiet Rehabilitation”; Nelli Grigor’evna Shakhnazarova, *Paradoksy sovetskoi muzykal’noi kul’tury: 30-e gody* [Paradoxes of Soviet Musical Culture: The 1930s], Moscow: Izdateloi muzykal’ev, 2001.

13 Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999; Susannah Lockwood Smith, “From Peasants to Professionals: The Socialist-Realist Transformation of a Russian Folk Choir”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3 (3), 2002, pp. 393-425.

but its policy (and output) remain a mystery even today. The reason for the distinctive nature of Soviet music was its political and educational mission – controlled by several state institutions – to propagate socialist values. It must be noted that the debate about what precisely is proper “music for the masses” began with the early years of the Soviet Union and continued until its collapse.¹⁴

The existence of the top-down control of state institutions did not mean that Soviet music was completely manipulated and controlled by the state. Tomoff argues in his review on Shakhnazarova that classical music existed despite state control and was complete with artistic ambitions for high levels of musical expression and an ambivalent response to the pressure to create music according to the canons of Socialist Realism.¹⁵ There were similar tendencies in the whole of the Soviet cultural sphere. This does not mean that individual and state interests were in conflict. Alexei Yurchak calls it a “deeper paradox of the socialist system” that at first inspection contradictory elements, positions and cultural manifestations existed together.¹⁶ This argument in his book – and the paradox in general – is mostly neglected in academic writing, whereby several scholars support the view that Soviet citizens lived a double life where the public and private spheres were strictly separated.¹⁷

14 MacFayden, *Red Stars*; Rothstein, *The Quiet Rehabilitation*.

15 Kiril Tomoff, “Paradoksy sovetskoi muzykal’noi kultury: 30-e gody, and: Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music (review)”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4 (2), pp. 466-480.

16 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 168.

17 Tamara Dragadze, “The Domestication of Religion Under Soviet Communism”, *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. Chris M. Hann, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 141-151; Caroline Humphrey, *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Katherine Verdery, *What was socialism, and what comes next?*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

However, the black and white portrayal of Soviet life does not help us to understand such a complex society and is especially problematic when it comes to the analysis of everyday socialist culture. The Soviet Union and the whole socialist block did not exist in a vacuum, as contacts with the western world existed on a formal and informal level. Music, fashion and other spheres of “capitalist” mass culture were followed, copied and consumed by Soviet people, ironically and not always illegally.¹⁸ Despite the intention of designing a new socialist cultural space, authorities and industry were too slow and ineffective to create the socialist substitute for the more attractive western consumer culture. Therefore, products of the west were known and valued.¹⁹ In very limited amounts, western music or consumer goods were legally available, or re-produced by Soviet artists, fashion designers or enterprises. Yurchak’s reading of Soviet internationalism demonstrates its ambivalence between the concepts of “bad” and “good” culture: “Ultimately, this means that one did not have to think of ‘socialist’ and ‘bourgeois’ cultural forms as inherently incompatible because their meaning could shift depending on how and where these forms were used.”²⁰ As an example, Yurchak uses jazz music which was both considered as the protest music of African Americans and as a “bourgeois” decadent music.²¹ A similar ambivalence existed across all spheres of life, especially culture. Moreover, the ambivalent position of western culture increased

iversity Press, 1996.

18 S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

19 Davis Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

20 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 165.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

during the short period of relaxation or détente which is politically regarded as rather unsuccessful.²² However, détente legalized western music, films and other art forms in the Soviet environment. From my childhood I recall reading newspaper articles harshly critical of the “bourgeois” governments of France and Italy. At the same time I grew up with French and Italian comedies, openly shown in Estonian cinemas. Détente made it also possible for western music to receive some airplay on Soviet radio and to be released on the Melodiia record label.²³

The “deeper paradox of the socialist system” applies – among other things – to Soviet (light) music culture. It is difficult to say when the concept of *estrada* was born and this question is also beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the concept has multiple meanings and contents as shown by the scholar of Russian popular music David MacFadyen who discusses the Russian term *estrada* investigating the word’s French roots. MacFadyen argues that in the French tradition *estrada* means “small stage”, and defines it as “a wide ranging term that includes pop music as well as modern dance, comedy, circus arts, and any other performance not on the ‘big,’ classical stage”.²⁴ Indeed, *estrada* artists could have been stand up or circus artists and were often officially named so. However, in the popular understanding of Soviet people, the term *estrada* was interchangeably associated with the term “popular music” or “pop music” and the term *svezdy estrady* (*estrada* stars) was generally (but not exclusively) used to indicate suc-

cessful and well-known singers. *Estrada* music was not always dance music but could also be for seated concert halls and take the form of a romantic song or ballad. *Estrada* as the broad Soviet pop music genre was sometimes very ironic, while some artists were deadly serious, some songs were extremely *Schlager*-like whereas others included elements of rock music.²⁵ The musical output is probably not as defining for the genre as the form: typical for *estrada* music was (and still is) that the singers were – as a rule – accompanied by huge orchestras dominated by wind instruments. While the nature of *estrada* is fluid, there is also another phenomenon surrounding Soviet pop music – the vocal-instrumental ensemble (*vokal’no-instrumental’nyi ansambl’*) or VIA. It is generally agreed that the term was used for state approved rock collectives because the word “rock” was essentially forbidden in the Soviet Union. Due to the Soviet institutional setting, all music collectives had to be registered (more about this below) and because it was impossible to register as a “rock ensemble” yet impossible to ignore the popularity of rock music, the concept of the VIA was invented in 1966.²⁶ However, there is evidence that the term VIA was used for the first time on a concert poster in 1964 by the seven-piece band *Avangard* from Donetsk, Ukraine, who would perform their own interpretations of western artists like Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Hollies or The Shadows.²⁷

25 Ingo Grabowsky, “Motor der Verwestlichung: Das sowjetische Estrada-Lied 1950-1975”, *Osteuropa* 62, 2012, pp. 21-35.

26 David-Emil Wickström and Yngvar B. Steinholt, “Visions of the (Holy) Motherland in Contemporary Russian Popular Music: Nostalgia, Patriotism, Religion and Russkii Rok”, *Popular Music and Society* 32 (3), 2009, pp. 313-330, here p. 314; Troitskii, *Back in the USSR*.

27 Evgenii Iasenov, *Zdes’ nachinalis’ VIA* 2012, <http://www.donjetsk.com/retro/1592-zdes-nachinalis-via.html>, accessed 30 December 2012.

22 Robert G. Kaiser, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Good-bye to Détente”, *Foreign Affairs* 59, 1980, pp. 500-521.

23 Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, pp. 125-126, 166. It must be noted that no one I have spoken to in Estonia had heard about the Détente but the word used in Estonian was “pingelödvendus”.

24 MacFadyen, *Estrada?!*, p. 3.

The scholars (and supporters) of Russian and Soviet rock tend to juxtapose the VIAs as “official” watered down rock as opposed to the “real” or unofficial rock bands.²⁸ (However, the opinion of VIA musicians is usually not asked for. Väino Land, the leader and initiator of the Estonian VIA *Fix* explained to me that VIAs were neither rock nor *estrada* but should be seen in the tradition of western bands like The Bee Gees or The Eagles. Their music was distinguishable by a high level of musicianship and complicated song structure.²⁹ Line ups of the VIAs were usually large, containing six to twelve musicians. It was not unusual for a VIA to have three singers, string and wind instruments, keyboards, and to be accompanied by electric guitars. The music of one VIA band could contain a mixture of different genres from folk, reggae, pop, rock or *estrada*. Their appearance was also not unified. For instance, the Belorussian group *Pesniary* not only performed psychedelic versions of folk tunes but also wore folk costumes on the stage. The Estonian band *Fix* had in its heyday various costumes for the band members encapsulating the image of a rocker, worker, *estrada* artist and so forth. Considering the nature of VIA-music, the assumption that VIA was a young musicians’ attempt to play rock music within an ideologically determined official framework sounds more correct than the previously mentioned negative interpretation.³⁰

In order to be officially recognized or to have the status as a “professional” performer, all artists and bands had to be registered and were subject to various regulations. *Estrada* performers and VIAs had to belong to a certain enterprise (as club artists) or to a state

concert agency (philharmony). Every Soviet republic and most big cities had their own philharmonic orchestra (*Roskontsert*, Estonian Philharmony, Moscow Philharmony, etc.) which was subordinated to the state concert agencies of *Goskontsert* and *Sovkontsert*. In order to perform, every professional artist had to undergo “tarification” (*tarifitseerimine* in Estonian), a demonstration concert in front of a committee that determined the “artistic” level of the performer. According to that level, performers were given a “category”. The musical “category” was important because it determined the activity and income of the performer. Artists with lower categories were allowed to perform only in factory clubs or houses of culture, whereas a higher category meant permission to perform all over the Soviet Union and abroad. The higher the category, the higher was the salary tariff or *punktitasu* per performance. The tariff was paid independent of the size of crowd and length of performance. The “tarification” was essential for determining a musician’s position in the artists’ and bands’ community, because the category affected directly their travel possibilities and size of audience. Not only were lower category artists unable to perform officially outside their home republic, but because categories were given according to “artistic maturity” it also symbolized the quality of the band.

VIAs and *estrada* artists not only had to prove their level of mastery but also register their repertoire. The bulk of a set list of a Soviet performer had to contain works of Soviet composers (especially members of the Union of Composers) and only a small percentage was left for works of composers from other socialist countries and an even smaller share allowed for music of western origin.³¹ This reg-

28 Cushman, *Notes from Underground*; Steinholt and Wickström, “Introduction”; Troitskii, *Back in the USSR*.

29 Interview with Väino Land, 4 december 2012.

30 Grabowsky, “Motor der Verwestlichung”, p. 31.

31 Cited from Rothstein, “The Quiet Rehabilitation”.

ulation is often interpreted as a strategy for the ideological control over music to guarantee a correct ideological bias for the entertainment of the masses. Alas, these regulations had a financial basis as well. "In the Soviet Union a well functioning copyright system existed," explained Alar Madisson, long time vocalist and manager of *Fix*.³² "At every concert we had to fill in repertoire lists and the authors of these songs received money. When your songs were popular then all the bands played them and altogether the sum of money could be very substantial. Can you imagine how many thousands of roubles Raimonds Pauls earned with his '*Alye rozy*' (*Purple roses*)? Every restaurant band played it." The role of the Union of Composers as the monopolist Soviet music publisher remains unstudied. However, in cooperation with other state institutions like *Muzfond*³³ and *Kompozitor* publishing house the Union of Composers collected and distributed royalty money and was therefore interested in ensuring that the songs of its members were performed as a first priority. This also explains why throughout the Soviet period the Union of Composers lobbied for the compulsory use of its members music.³⁴

A clear picture of the Soviet culture industry

32 Interview with Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011.

33 *Muzfond* was a Soviet state cultural institution whose task was to provide finances to Soviet composers. These finances were grants, loans, and stipends. The institution also managed houses, nurseries and vacation resorts to be used by members of the Composers' Union. All members of the Composers' Union were automatically members of *Muzfond*, but *Muzfond* was allowed to admit members who had no Union membership. *Muzfond* received 5 percent of publication royalties and 2 percent from theatre box offices. It was also financed through membership fees (see Tomoff 2006, pp. 49-50).

34 Cited from Rothstein, "The Quiet Rehabilitation". Because the royalty money was paid on the grounds of a repertoire list, it was not uncommon that artists performed other songs but delivered lists with the "right" selection to avoid trouble with the officials, see Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*.

remains elusive if the economic interests of concert agencies and the state record company Melodiia are not included. Melodiia's profits remain a mystery akin to its erratic catalogue. The role and activity of the philharmonies or state music agencies must also be incorporated into the picture. The role of concert agencies will be discussed later but they were subordinated to the planned economy similar to all Soviet enterprises and fulfilling of the plan was – as a rule – accompanied with a high bonus payment to its workers. Moreover, there is evidence from my interviews and in published sources that the philharmonies or music agencies were engaged in organizing "black" concerts or events where the profit was directly distributed by the organizers and performers. Taking a closer look at the activities of institutions whose official goal was to organize and oversee the correct ideological entertainment of Soviet people, the economic motivation of all these institutions cannot be ignored.

Estonian invasion and music business

Estonia has a strong entertainment music tradition oriented to western musical styles. In the 1930s, Estonia danced the foxtrot and tango, popular dances everywhere in Europe.³⁵ This western orientation continued after the incorporation into the Soviet Union: in the 1960s Estonia was swamped by the beat music and rock performed by "guitar ensembles".³⁶ Estonian young people along with musicians tried to be up to date with contemporary developments in pop and rock throughout the Soviet era. In several memoirs, people spoke of how new records appeared in Estonia within a few months or even weeks after they

35 Heino Pedusaar, *Tardunud helide maailm*, Tallinn: Koolibri, 2007.

36 Salumets, *Rockrapsoodia*.

were released in the west and circulated via cassettes within the music loving community. Many people had relatives in the west who sometimes provided their Soviet kin with new music on cassette or vinyl LPs. The citizens of Tallinn were able to watch and listen to Finnish TV and radio, and new music was recorded from these sources and re-recorded later by other people. It was not unusual for Estonian artists to re-record contemporary hits with Estonian texts and this way new hits were spread among listeners.³⁷ In the 1970s, Estonia had a healthy *estrada* and VIA scene, this music was played on TV and radio. Trend consciousness in music was accompanied with the western heritage that was reflected in fashion, cuisine or architecture. For many people in the Soviet Union, Estonia and the Baltic States generally embodied western culture. These republics were the “Soviet West”. When Yurchak writes about the “imaginary West” in Soviet culture as a non-reachable illusionary space, the Baltic republics were the physical embodiment of those imaginings.³⁸ This imagery was supported by the Estonian self-isolation and distance from Soviet cultural life: Soviet music, theater or literature was not particularly popular in Estonia during the Soviet era and people preferred to read books or newspapers in their mother tongue. The only notable exception were Soviet films, which were consumed via state TV.

The first Soviet Estonian artist to achieve huge

37 For instance, Eurovision winners were often re-recorded already on the night the song won the contest and played on the radio already the next day. The covering of western pop hits was interpreted by Estonian artist as a mission to introduce fresh music to the Estonian audience and regarded as resistance to Soviet cultural policy. See Margo Vaino and Jaak Urmet, *Tühjad pihud: Gunnar Grapsi elu ja muusika*, Tallinn: Kirjastus Pegasus, 2013; T. Vahter, “Karuks istus vangitornis...” 1980 - aasta, *mis raputas Eestist*, Tallinn: OÜ Hea Lugu ja Tarmo Vahter, 2015.

38 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

popularity in the Soviet Union was Georg Ots, an opera and *estrada* singer. Georg Ots’ success in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated to the Russian concert agencies that an accent and western style can be an exotic bonus that draws an audience all over the Soviet Union.³⁹ Later in 1974, in Tallinn, the band *Apelsin* was established. *Apelsin* played a mixture of country, rock’n’roll and *estrada* but nevertheless embodied for Russian music fans western rock music.⁴⁰ As the long-time road manager of the band, Aare Nahk, told me “*Apelsin* has always toured in Russia” and probably they were the first Estonian band to enter Soviet concert halls. In the early 1980s, another band, *Fix*, started to tour Russia, having their first concert in Leningrad performing together with Valerii Leont’ev and other *estrada* stars. The self-isolation of the Estonian music scene is well reflected by the recollections of *Fix*’s manager Alar Madisson: “We had no idea about Russian music whatsoever. We did not know Leont’ev at all. After the concert we understood that he was a first class star in Russia.”⁴¹

The phenomenon of the Estonian invasion can be seen in the context of changes in Soviet cultural policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Christine Evans demonstrates in her article about Soviet mass culture, in that period, officials began to look for new concepts of entertainment.⁴² New shows appeared on TV that included music and comedy. After Khrushchev’s “Thaw”, after the détente and the stabi-

39 Interestingly, Georg Ots was also immensely popular in Finland, being probably the only Soviet *estrada* artist who was regularly able to perform in a capitalist country. See Kulle Raig, *Saaremaa valss: Georg Otsa elu*, Tallinn: Varrak, 2002.

40 Troitskii, *Back in the USSR*, p. 117.

41 Interview in Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011.

42 Christine Evans, “Song of the Year and Soviet Mass Culture in the 1970s”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12 (3), 2011, pp. 617-645.

lization of society and increase in prosperity, Soviet people looked for a new kind of entertainment. Western music appeared on Soviet TV and radio programs and people apparently wanted more.⁴³

As apparent from interviews and written sources, TV shows like *Song of the Year* or *Little Blue Flame (Goluboi Ogonek)* opened the door for the success of Estonian music, and for new genres of music in general. Especially a performance in *Goluboi Ogonek* guaranteed success and concert bookings all over the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ These shows were aired on Central Television and watched throughout the whole country. *Song of the Year* and similar shows created a framework that could rapidly be filled with new content once censorship weakened in the second half of the 1980s, and which could (and did) transition quite seamlessly to post-Soviet Russian television.⁴⁵ This observation can be generally applied to the whole Soviet entertainment sector. The existence of western mass culture could not be denied anymore and officials attempted to offer a Soviet equivalent to western music, fashion or TV-entertainment, all of which helped to enable the later success of “domestic” western music. Anne Veski believes that she was discovered when Central TV showed a film in which she performed. She argues that Estonian music was “exotic” for Soviet people, and it was more oriented to western pop and rock than towards ordinary Soviet *estrada* or VIA music.⁴⁶ Musicians from *Fix* told me that they were even told not to sing in Russian but in Estonian or English. “If we wanted to have Russian music we would have booked a Russian artist”, one manager told them. “We

were different”, Alar Madisson told me, “We dressed differently than Russian bands and we had a real western-style stage show. One of our best tricks was when the guitarist ran to the edge of the stage and then slid on his knees beneath the piano while playing a solo. That drove people mad”.⁴⁷ When looking at videos on Youtube it appears that Estonian bands were visually remarkably different from the typical Soviet *estrada* artists. They tended to move around more on stage, wore western style stage costumes and in the case of *Apelsin* or *Fix* featured humor and irony into their shows.

In the early 1980s several Estonian artists toured (*gastrolirovali* in Russian) continuously in Russia. They performed either solo concerts or in huge gala concerts with other artists. “A gala concert was an easy job,” comments Rein Lang, a former functionary of the Young Communist League *Komsomol*, “You performed two songs but got paid for a full length concert”.⁴⁸ Specific to Soviet show business was that artists often had to perform several concerts a day over a period of three or four days. “When modern rock bands boast that they perform over forty concerts a year then I just laugh. We performed seventy concerts in a month,” told Arne Nahk from *Apelsin*.⁴⁹ Tõnu Aare, the singer of *Apelsin* opines that the record of the band was seventy-two concerts in eighteen days in Ukraine.⁵⁰ Alar Madisson told me that the Estonian record is held by Jaak Joala who in the mid-1980s performed twelve gala concerts in one day in Moscow, switching between two stadiums with a bus.⁵¹ Not only was the workload of Estonian performers big, the distances they had to cross were huge as well. During

43 Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*.

44 Evans, “Song of the Year”, p. 620; Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 165.

45 Evans, “Song of the Year”, p. 620.

46 Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 149.

47 Interview with Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011.

48 Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 156.

49 Interview with Arne Nahk, 6 July 2010.

50 Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 163.

51 Interview with Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011.

one season that lasted several months a band could have performed in the Far East, Central Asia, Ukraine and the Caucasus, constantly travelling by planes and trains.

By the mid-1980s an un-official hierarchy among members of the Estonian invasion had formed.⁵² All my informants agree that the most popular Estonian artist in the Soviet Union was Jaak Joala. "Jaak Joala was number one. Then there was a huge gap and then came Anne Veski and Tõnis Mägi. And then the rest," explained members of *Apelsin*. "Jaak Joala was worshipped like a god in Russia. He did not even walk three steps, he had always a white Volga⁵³ to transport him," remembered Arne Nahk.⁵⁴ "Jaak Joala is damned talented. Of course he was successful," said Väino Land.⁵⁵ There is also an assumption that Soviet concert agencies were looking for non-Russian performers to have variety in their program and consciously promoted Jaak Joala.

The role of *Roskontsert* and its boss Felix Katz in the success of Estonian artists in the Soviet Union is undisputable.⁵⁶ However, not only *Roskontsert* had a commercial interest in the relationship. All Estonian artists and bands successful in the Soviet Union had developed strategies and made business partners in show business. "Every band had its own contact person in *Roskontsert*, *Goskontsert* and *Sovkontsert*. Details were kept secret and not

52 The list of the bands associated with the Estonian invasion is relatively short, including artists like Anne Veski, Jaak Joala, Tõnis Mägi and the Magnetic Band, Vitamiin, Laine, Fix, Radar, Mahavok, Kuldne Trio, Nemo. Most bands operated under the Estonian Philharmony.

53 Soviet elite car.

54 Interview with Arne Nahk, 6 July 2010.

55 Interview with Väino Land, 4 December 2012.

56 The controversial nature of Mr. Katz needs additional research. When Estonian artists praise him as a great friend of the Estonian *estrada* (see Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 163) then Oleg Sapoznin told me that Mr. Katz was just exploiting artists and the Estonian Philharmony refused to work with him (Interview with Oleg Sapoznin, 11 March 2013).

shared", Väino Land told me.⁵⁷ These contacts were instrumental for both promotion and bookings. Simultaneously, the Estonian Philharmony and its director Oleg Sapoznin organized concerts and tours using their own contacts with other Soviet concert agencies. But the initiative of bands was tolerated. "We allowed them to do what they wanted," commented Oleg Sapoznin.⁵⁸

Such liberty and different business partners combined with stylistic differences were the reason why Estonian bands built their fan bases in the big cities like Moscow or Leningrad. While *Magnetic Band* or *Fix* were clearly rock oriented then *Radar*, for example, with its experimental sound were able to draw an audience looking for something different. Jaak Joala's romantic image was contrasted with the Kuldne Trio semi-vulgar stage show, Anne Veski as the more or less classic diva was popular with older audiences, whereas Kare Kauk's youthful disco appearance made her popular among young Russian and Ukrainian girls. Oleg Sapoznin argued that the variations in audience preferences were taken into account when tours featuring several different styles of bands were organized.⁵⁹

Management skills and informal networks were of great importance for the success of Estonian artists but probably even more important was the music and performance. "You cannot fool a Russian audience," told a band member of *Fix*. "They recognize immediately when you perform in a half-hearted way. Either you are 100% committed or people just leave. We always left the stage covered with sweat." The selection of songs and orchestration of the stage choreography were careful-

57 Interview with Väino Land, 4 December 2012.

58 Interview with Oleg Sapoznin, 11 March 2013.

59 Interview with Oleg Sapoznin, 11 March 2013.

ly discussed and planned.⁶⁰ “When we had a short slot in a gala concert we usually performed four or five songs. *Fix* always started with a melodious tune, the next one was faster and the culmination of the performance was a rock song. The last song was slower, usually reggae, we cooled people down and prepared them for the next artist.”

Adopting a western style, using personal contacts and strong commitment may show *how* Estonian artists reached their popularity. However, it does not tell us *why* they were interested in having an artistic career outside of their home republic. This aspect will be discussed in the next section.

We have played in every collective farm already...

“You know why we went to perform in Russia?” asked Alar Madisson. And raising three fingers, he explained “Because of travelling, money and fame. We had achieved everything possible in Estonia, played in every club and village several times already. Russia was a new territory for us, the possibility to travel and see new places”, he added.⁶¹ During the short period of the Estonian invasion, Estonian artists literally performed in every corner of the former Soviet Union, even in places difficult or impossible to reach. As entertainers, they performed often in so-called closed cities, industrial centers where one needed special permission to enter. Members of *Apelsin* told me how they toured the Russian Far East starting their tour in Anadyr, the administrative center of Chukotka. *Apelsin* performed in cities in the border area, also often closed in the Soviet era.⁶² Several of these regions had very

little or no tourist infrastructure and in many cases still lack it. Apart from the permissions, for an average Soviet citizen it was complicated to buy plane tickets to these destinations because local enterprises usually booked the flights for their own workers. As for musicians, travel arrangements were made by concert agencies and therefore artists were able to enjoy the privilege of visiting the remote regions.⁶³ Moreover, Estonians also performed in holiday resorts on the coast of the Black Sea or in the cities of Central Asia. The best artists like Anne Veski, *Fix* or *Magnetic Band* were in some rare cases able to perform in other socialist countries or friendly African and American states like Cuba, Zambia or Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ Depending on personal contacts within the concert agencies, many artists developed a certain regional focus: While *Apelsin* never performed in Central Asia then *Fix* was rarely seen in the Caucasus and the paths of touring Estonians often did not cross at all.

A serious motivating factor for touring the Soviet republics was of course money. As mentioned above, according to the centrally fixed tariffs performers always received the same salary independent of the length of the concert and audience numbers. Touring actively and performing several times a day, high category musicians were able to earn substantial amounts of money. Avo Ulvik, who toured Russia for a long period explains that in Estonia as a professional musician on an Estonian Philharmony payroll he earned one hundred rubles a month whereas during the tours he earned nearly 700 rubles, i.e. seven times more.⁶⁵ Moreover, additional income was earned with illegal performances in clubs and private parties or at unofficial unregistered (or

⁶⁰ Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 158.

⁶¹ Interview with Alar Madisson, 6 April 2011.

⁶² Collective interview, 6 October 2011.

⁶³ Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 171.

⁶⁴ E.g. Salumets, *Rockrapsoodja*, p. 238.

⁶⁵ Rinne, *Laulev revolutsioon*, p. 172.

khaltura) concerts where local cultural workers split the profit of the evening with the artists. Rock singer and drummer Gunnar Graps organized several tours where most concerts were *khaltura*.⁶⁶ Apart from the music, Estonian artists found other possibilities to make money. Rein Lang tells that touring artists made a profit from the Soviet shortage economy by bringing along fashionable clothes and other commodities from Estonia and selling them in remote Russian towns.⁶⁷ Very often when Estonian artists performed in closed industrial cities they were able to obtain imported goods like Finnish boots, etc. These were purchased in large quantities and brought back to Estonia to sell on the black market.⁶⁸ It is generally agreed that by intensive touring one was able to earn enough money to build a house or purchase a car.⁶⁹

Last but not least, it was important to be part of the large scale show business, to perform for huge audiences. Anne Veski recalls: "In Russia you feel like a star. In Estonia you are just a singer."⁷⁰ Artists of the Estonian invasion performed on a level that was unthinkable in Estonia. A major part of the *Fix* folklore were the concerts in Omsk where the band performed twice a day each time for 20,000 people. Anne Veski's biggest concert drew 36,000 listeners.⁷¹ The experience of performing in front of a huge mass of people makes the artist emotional even today, two decades later. "You know what is the biggest kick? You flip your fingers and 10,000 people flip their fingers. Then you say 'Oooo!' and 10,000 people repeat it", told Alari Madisson. Huge concerts were accompanied by life in luxurious hotels, fancy cars and

the worship of fans. This all built an emotional link with the Russian music scene and the country itself, an affection that several artists felt even when we recorded interviews.

Conclusion

In February 2010 Estonia was embroiled in a small scandal. The president of Estonia sent an invitation to Anne Veski to attend a reception in honor of the anniversary of the Estonian Republic. During the reception the diva was supposed to receive a medal of honor. However, Anne Veski turned down the invitation because she was booked for a series of concerts in Russia. As she explained, contracts were signed six months ago and there was no possibility to change the dates. The Estonian social media was full of angry comments that accused Anne Veski of unpatriotic behavior. Anne Veski is currently the only Estonian artist actively performing in Russia. In 1993 managers of former famous Estonian bands organized a meeting with representatives of a Russian show business firm in Moscow's Estonian embassy, with the aim to restore the former fruitful relationship. It turned out to be a fiasco. The time was over and Russian promoters were no longer interested in Estonian artists.

It is surprising that the second smallest Soviet republic by territory and the smallest by size of population left such a lasting legacy on Soviet and post-Soviet culture. The period of the Estonian invasion was short and the number of singers and groups limited, but the artists and songs are still remembered in many former Soviet republics. The popularity of Estonian artists offers a possibility to look behind the state controlled media and concert organizations. The Estonian invasion was not only the outcome of the individual ambitions of the

66 Ibid., pp. 152-3.

67 Ibid., pp. 156-7.

68 Ibid., p. 181.

69 Ibid., pp. 183; 189.

70 Ibid., p. 182.

71 Ibid., p. 160.

musicians, but closely related to changes in the larger political and cultural setting. With a closer reading it appears that Soviet culture and its structures were not so strictly controlled and manipulated by the state, but full of contradictions and ambivalence. First of all, the methods and policies of the Soviet cultural and media institutions were not only ideological. Behind the slogans of educating the masses and influencing people's political views existed a culture industry with the aim to make a profit and reach a bigger audience by offering a wide range of entertainment. For that purpose Estonian music was the substitute for the existing "imaginary West". Artists were not subordinated to strict control that determined their appearance and music, as is believed. It is apparent that musicians were able to manipulate official regulations and pursue their own interests, whether musical or financial. The agency of performers and mercantile politics of the Union of Composers, philharmonies or TV stations demonstrate the "deeper paradox" of Soviet life, the multiple sides and layers of Soviet culture. The paradox becomes deeper considering that most artists who were popular in the Soviet Union participated as leading figures in the Singing Revolution of the 1990s, recording several important patriotic songs. I believe that the analysis of the Estonian musical invasion helps us to understand how the presumably highly regulated and centrally controlled Soviet society functioned on an unofficial level. In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a short debate about whether the Soviet Union can be discussed in terms of the existence of civil society or not. In this discussion, anthropologists

introduced a broader definition than political studies scientists.⁷² A civil society in socialism means that people were able to find spheres where they were able to make their own decisions and manipulate or question official ideologies and practices. As it appears, Soviet people and institutions had developed a wide range of strategies and practices to follow interests other than building socialism. Besides implementing the social plan, concert organizers were interested in profits, artists in money, glamour and fame. The complexity of the brief period of the Estonian musical invasion can help us to contemplate the nature of Soviet society and its structures beyond the spheres of music and culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aimar Ventsel is an ethnologist and a Senior Researcher at the University of Tartu. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in East Siberia where he studied property relations, local music business and identity processes. In recent years he has studied regional policy, language processes and identity building in Russian 'ethnic' regions. He also worked on punk and skinhead subculture in East Germany and the history of Estonian *estrada* music. His main publications include his doctoral dissertation *Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity: Kinship and property relations in a Siberian village* (Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia 7, 2005) and *Siberian Movements: How Money and Goods travel in and out of Northwestern Sakha* (Electronic Journal of Folklore 49, 2011).

72 Chris Hann and Elisabeth Dunn, eds., *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, London: Routledge, 1996.