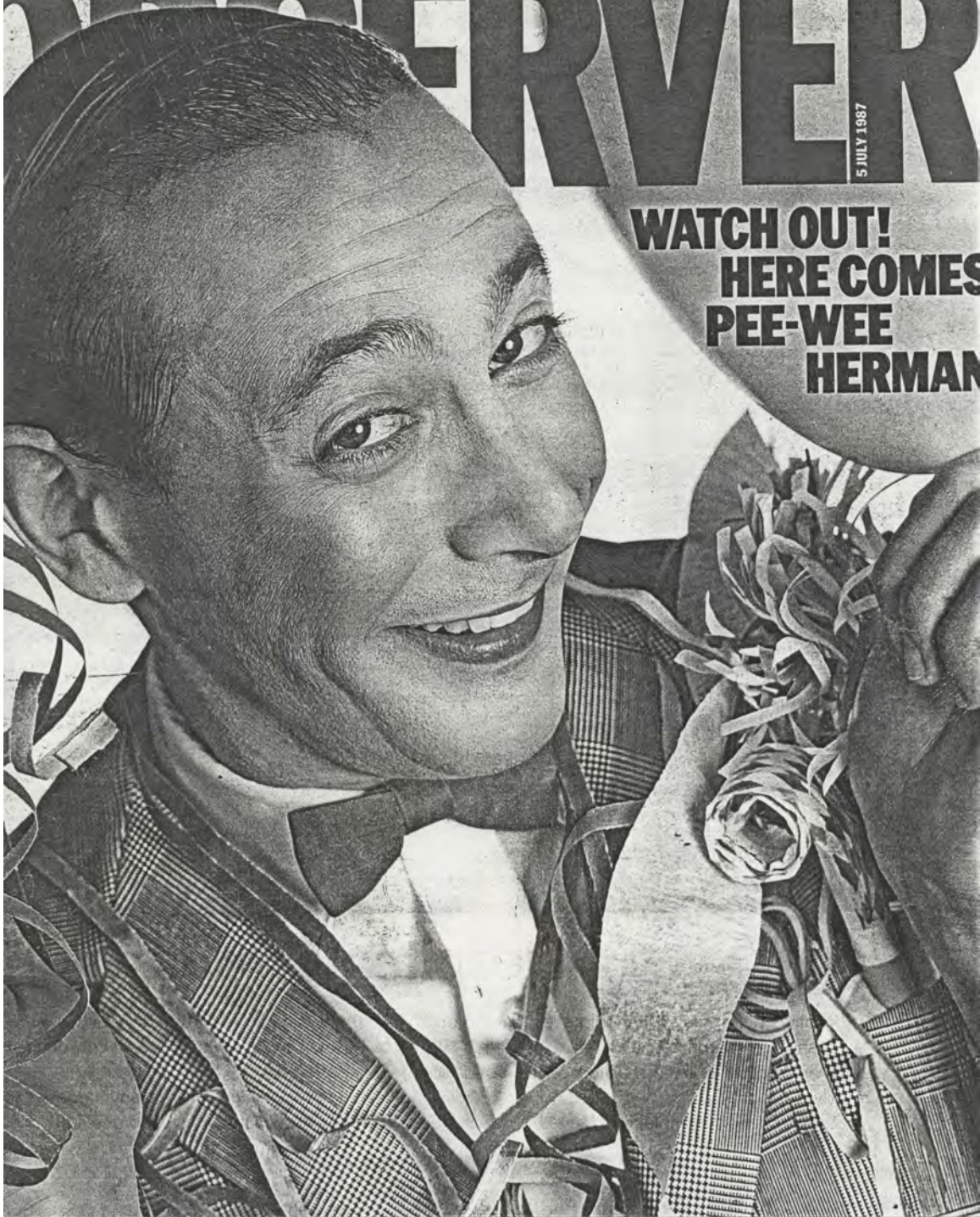


PERFORMANCE SPECIAL: ON THE TRACK, AT THE CLUBS, IN THE GHETTO

# ROCKY HORNER

5 JULY 1987

**WATCH OUT!  
HERE COMES  
PEE-WEE  
HERMAN**







*The USSR is now actively encouraging its rock musicians to come in from the cold. This week, as part of the Capital Festival, a British rock concert will, for the first time, feature Russian bands*

# ROCKING THE KREMLIN

**T**HE BUS SPEEDS ACROSS THE SPACIOUS, TWILIGHT STREETS OF LENINGRAD. 'There is a rock concert tonight, at the Palace of Youth,' the In-tourist guide informs us gloomily. 'I don't advise you to go. Her voice suggests' not so

much the Party line on decadent youth but the fear that Westerners may find their music dull. An unlikely prospect – whatever else, Leningrad in its third year of glasnost is not a dull city.

On the way to the concert by taxi the city presents itself as a series of long dusty streets, shop-windows uniformly designed and strangely uncluttered by advertisements. At intersections, there are glimpses of onion-dome cathedrals, then the River Neva with its chunks of ice under the thin clear light. Finally the car pulls up beside a dour concrete building, one of the grey 'Palaces of Youth' that dominate most Soviet urban centres.

A hundred or so kids are milling quietly on the steps. A few blue-uniformed police seem to mill with them. The concert of 'new wave' and 'metal' had sold out quickly. Rock and roll now presents a tolerable face to the authorities – they've even accepted its spiritual hold on the young. As a result, the ticketless Metalist (Soviet heavy metal fans) – recognisable by their plain, un-Western clothing – are able to hang around and spend their surplus three roubles (£3) on soft drinks or the disco upstairs. The familiar sounds of Culture Club and the Drifters boom out; downstairs in the coffee bar recent videos of Madonna and Rainbow top the playlist, while the vestibule wall carries paintings by former underground art groups, the New

18 Painters and the Mytki.

The Soviet Culture Ministry's Moscow Research Centre in Arts estimated in 1983 that a startling 70,000 pop bands existed in the USSR. Of these, 145 were 'professional' – paid for by the State concert agencies; 29,552 were registered as 'amateur'; the rest were in the shadows.

Back on stage at the Youth Palace one of these shadow bands, Chaif or 'Crazy', described as Siberian metal, is making its Leningrad debut – and facing a typical problem. They have no instruments. Frantic borrowing from the next band on provides elementary guitar and drum backing to their lead singer. With sweat pouring down his chin, this denim-clad figure then lets loose a long stored-up burst of growling poetry. About half the audience respond with loud shouts of agreement and waving fists, some even hurling their shirts into the air, the other half remaining stonily in their seats. Perhaps they know the singer's daytime job – deputy to his local soviet; the rough equivalent of city councillor.

Leaning against the back wall of the auditorium, Anton, one of the city's first rock managers, smiles wryly. 'They're good, he says simply, 'their lyrics are quite funny. For Soviet songwriters, language is more important than the music, a fact frequently misunderstood by Western visitors who tend to dismiss Soviet rock and roll as a pale imitation of their own.

Now, with virtually all barriers on performance lifted (except for the small population of punks), some of the established underground artists are facing a new, unexpected, ethical dilemma – whether or not to go official. The State wants many of them to join up with the other 'professional' rock groups, offering a wage of 250 roubles a month, no royalties on records and a place in a state-censored, pre-packaged rock show.

To find a voice that understands this

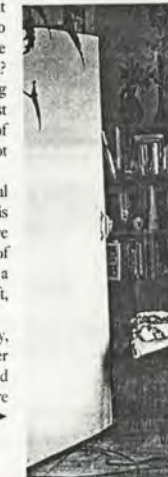
dilemma better than any, the trail leads up a graffiti-covered stairway just down the canal from Leningrad's main street, the Nevsky Prospect. At the top is the doorbell of Boris Grebenshikov, poet and lead singer of the country's most popular band, Aquarium. Many regard him as the John Lennon of the Soviet rock underground, and this April his picture appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. The reason: after 15 years in the vanguard of the underground's struggle for survival he has just released an Aquarium album on Russia's State-controlled (and only) record company, Melodiya. The 83,000 copies of this, the first official underground release, hardly touched the shelves. His records sell out and some have accused him of doing the same, but Boris disagrees.

Over an expensive bottle of vodka (at double the 1985 price), and smoking Marlboro (sold only in the foreign currency shops), he explained his current attitude in the light of the glasnost changes.

'Time has moved on. I don't feel the need to fight any more. Why should I fight against some official who has no understanding of rock and roll, whose main interest is in keeping his position? This talk about official status neutralising rock; for me this is not an issue. At worst it's a challenge; because the real issues of my songs are spiritual struggles, not temporary political ones.

Boris's reputation for proffering mystical rather than political solutions makes his decision somewhat easier. It may also have been aided by the fact that, at the age of 34, with wife and child, he still lives in a dilapidated sixth-floor flat with no lift, telephone, or realistic income.

Another member of the drinking party, Sasha, the group's bassist, sheds further light on the subject. 'We are not dominated by money like many in the West. Here we have very little scope. With his ►





We do not like the way the Soviet bands follow everything you do in the West. We are creating an authentic Russian sound



**THE GROUPS:** (left) Aquarium in concert in Leningrad; (above) Autograph, who will be at the Capital Music Festival, the first USSR band in a British rock concert



**THE ARTISTS:** (left) Valery of the New Decomposers; (above) a group of Leningrad's musical avant-garde in the communal flat inhabited by the New Painters



**THE CRITIC:** (left) Artyom Troitsky, Russia's foremost rock commentator; (above) the Leningrad Rock Club - an example of the new musical freedom he advocates

**Report and photographs by Peter Nasmyth**



monthly wage set below 250 roubles, while the State continues to make large profits from the ticket sales of his concerts. Aquarium concerts regularly sell out auditoriums of 6,000 plus), he displays a remarkable lack of sour grapes: 'We'll just continue to do what the soul dictates to us.'

While Aquarium have plumped for cooperation with the State, other underground bands still hold out. Victor soi, leader of the popular group Kino, explains their position. 'Every week Leningrad radio plays my songs. I ring them up and ask them not to but they carry on. For him the new *perestroika* (reconstruction) has not advanced nearly far enough. 'Until I'm allowed to play exactly how I want, I don't want this. I don't want people to think that the world as really changed that much until it has.'

Russian rock fans still have their frustrations, too – the problems of where to go, the lack of small localised versions of the Youth Palace, the inability to buy decent, stylish clothes, the low wages and the petty harassment by the police. Although rock and roll is no longer flatly regarded as 'contributing to wrong ideas and bad taste', and all major cities own rock clubs' – State-run centres where groups can now play – a semi-official musician like Victor still cannot earn a living through his art, and has to work hovelling coal three days a week.

Taking menial work offering long shifts followed by several days off, many rock musicians have ended up literally underground – as boiler-room attendants, tending the furnaces of tall Soviet housing blocks. Many of these caverns have been transformed into rock laboratories, and many songs are now written or discussed in these dim, claustrophobic basements.

The art world, too, is starting to creep out of its secret burrows. Timur, a founder member of the New Painters and leading figure in the design avant-garde, swings open the battered front door of their communal flat. The living space shows signs of having served many purposes over the years: studio, gallery, concert hall, as well as part-time home for 12. The walls are strewn with the relics of art exhibitions, sculpture and random acts of inspiration. The windows look directly on to Leningrad's KGB headquarters.

But to Timur this is now of no consequence. 'We are all supporters of Gorbachov, we hope he can succeed. We have no fear of the KGB.' His concern is more for the way forward in painting, a topic that sets him talking about the past, in particular the Twenties artist Mayakovsky, whose stylised posters are now part of modern Russian iconography. 'There has been nothing really new in Soviet art since Mayakovsky's time. Now a group of us,

artists, musicians, poets, are forming a Mayakovsky club. We want to pick up on that Soviet art revolution; we feel it was a very important period.'

Anton, manager of the art band The New Decomposers, emphasises the search for Russianness. 'Our band is Russian, and not Soviet, he insists. 'We do not like the way the Soviet bands follow everything you do in the West. Our group is named out of our desire to de-compose the Soviet Union from its now too common replication of Western bands and music. We are creating an 'authentic Russian sound in the new electronic rock music. The tape slotted in the Sony player reveals the band as an appealing blend of Russian church choirs, synthesised voice and keyboard. The sound captivated Brian Eno, who would like to include The New Decomposers in a musicians' TV bridge between Leningrad and London to be organised later this year.'

For Anton, the cultural estrangement of the past 50 years is now definitely ended. 'We are not part of the old middle-class dissidents; we are the new generation. We might even be the first generation.'

Then someone arrives with the latest video of U2, carried in over the Finnish border. A bulky Soviet VHS player is wheeled out and the assembled company settles into rapt contemplation of the TV screen. Under the flickering light the paradox facing this new generation shines very clear. They want to be Russian yet the hardware of communication – TVs, cassettes, videos – and the software of fresh cultural experimentation flow remorselessly from the West. Much of their art is inevitably decoupled from its Russian context.

Five hundred kilometres south, in Moscow, in a flat sporting current issues of *The Face* and *New Musical Express*, a CD player and a mercilessly ringing telephone, the rock journalist Artyom Troitsky is perfectly placed to elucidate. Dubbed the Russian Bob Geldof since his organisation of the Chernobyl Aid concert, he has become one of the most wanted men in rock and roll.

'The cultural situation here has changed drastically in the last year, he explains. 'Russian music is only now beginning to lose its inferiority complex, drop its rotten tradition of copying Western bands, and seek an authentic Soviet image, like some of our more experimental bands, Group B, for instance, here in Moscow. And with Western rock music in a state of such deep depression and confusion, it's a shame they haven't developed quite far enough to make a solid impression there yet.'

A key contact between Soviet and Western rock cultures, Troitsky is uniquely qualified to pass comment on



**A poster which is part of Gorbachov's campaign against young drinkers – it reads 'A tumbler, a glass, a cork – and out pops a hooligan'**

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both, and has just completed a chronicle of the history of Russian rock. 'Back in the USSR' for Omnibus Press in London. 'Many of our bands simply can't cope with this glasnost thing. It's slightly ironic that many of the articles in big official newspapers are more socially cutting, more critical, than the songs of rock bands. Musicians are afraid of being manipulated by the new, trendy politicians. But if you ask me, our bands are not brave enough, angry enough, at the moment. Now we have this sort of cultural revolution coming exclusively from the top. It must receive critical support. Bands must say if they don't like "reconstruction", or if they like it they must have the courage to say this too.'

Troitsky has never lacked such courage. Banned from the Soviet press in 1984 for writing an article in *Pravda* suggesting the formation of more official rock clubs, he then watched his ideas being put into practice. His opinion is now one of the most respected in the business.

'To me, the biggest danger here lies not with the people who want to shut up our bands, but the new commercial possibilities opening up. The whole thing could go the Western showbiz industry route, to the point where you have a group who call themselves Dire Straits yet make a million dollars each year, while your intelligent, experimental groups find it hard to get a TV appearance. Instead, we should combine the virtues of socialism with the freedom of expression you have in the West in a system where experimental, radical, even angry bands could receive State support. I think if we're talking about a cultural revolution we must have a new art. If we want to make people think and feel deeper and not act like puppets, then the State must encourage them.'

As these new ideas sink slowly into the layers of Politbureaucracy, British interest steadily builds. Last month a 'Red Wave' album was released, featuring four underground groups from Leningrad, including Aquarium. This Friday sees the first-ever concert of two Russian rock groups in England, Dialogue and Autograph, as highlights of the Capital Music Festival, with a live radio bridge between Moscow and London.

An even grander rock exchange looms on the horizon. In spring next year, a Greenpeace Washington/Moscow festival will link TV screens and give some major Western recording stars their Iron Curtain debut. Capital Festival co-ordinator John Burrows summed up the changing atmosphere:

'The first time I went to the Soviet Embassy three years ago, a great gorilla of a man came up and told me and my car to get out! Now it's quite different. They say, "Hello, John, nice to see you again."'