

Standing up to tyranny... with music

The rising tide of political rage on the streets of Belarus is being soundtracked by a decades-old rock anthem. **Malcolm Jack** finds out why this is the song to energise a popular revolt



A wind of change is blowing through Belarus, the former Soviet state dubbed “Europe’s last dictatorship”. Following another blatantly rigged presidential election, huge protests against authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko have repeatedly filled the streets of Minsk and other towns and cities. Whether sung en masse, blasted from cars or performed by musicians, a more than 30-year-old rock song has become the people’s anthem. A song about transformation which was a huge hit in the Eastern Bloc at the height of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reformist policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. A song that’s said to have played its part in the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It’s not the song you’re whistling.

Khochu Peremen by Kino – in English I Want Changes or simply Changes – is the Russian-speaking world’s most famous rock’n’roll protest anthem: a rousing, racing, electrifying post-punk thunderbolt with a chorus of “Our hearts are longing for changes! Our eyes are longing for changes!” According to one expert on Russian rock music, it was a much bigger deal at the time than even Wind of Change by West German band Scorpions, the 14 million-selling power ballad synonymous with the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that followed. “For most Soviets, Peremen was much more important,” states Joanna Stingray, an American music producer, singer and author who was married to Kino’s guitarist Yuri Kasparyan. “This is because it was written by their hero, not somebody from the West. Peremen was certainly overlooked by the world outside of Russia which promoted Wind of Change as the song of the time.”

Changes was written in 1986 by Kino’s half-Korean frontman Viktor Tsoi, a handsome, enigmatic proletariat-poet who when he wasn’t scrawling lyrics was shovelling coal into a boiler furnace. He was propelled to fame when he sang the song in the dramatic final scene of the 1987 Soviet film *Assa* – an official government production featuring hitherto banned Russian rock music. It launched Kino from the Leningrad underground to the USSR’s biggest band. In June 1990 they performed for 62,000 people at Moscow’s

Luzhniki Stadium – a concert that would tragically prove Tsoi’s last. He died in an accident a few weeks later.

Ironically, Tsoi always insisted that Changes was apolitical. “I interviewed Viktor a couple of times and asked him what his lyrics were about,” says Stingray, whose memoir *Red Wave: An American in the Soviet Music Underground* is out this month. “He said they were about each person’s inner struggle. He said all people have a kind of cage inside them that keeps them from doing things or understanding themselves. He did not write about politics, it was about an inner search and inner understanding of oneself.”

Yet in the revolutionary fervour of the time it couldn’t help but take on much broader significance. Even Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, acknowledged that Changes helped motivate him to ameliorate the failing federalist communist state from within before it was too late. Thirty-three years on the song’s complex legacy – which has seen it embraced by all kinds of sometimes competing political movements across the former USSR – continues to grow, and teach us how much more we still have to learn about the culture of countries once shrouded behind the Iron Curtain.

“Tsoi was a genius,” states Nadezhda, a young folk musician who raucously performed Changes with her band Irdorath at a rally in Minsk last month, where it has become a beacon of hope for Belarusians risking violence and imprisonment at the hands of security services. “The words of his song have not changed their strength over the years,” she says. “And we really need a change. The people want to reverse the situation when torture takes place in a cultured and civilised country with complete impunity.”

To march together with her friends through Minsk in a bright red dress, blaring the melody of Changes on her bagpipes, was “a very powerful feeling,” Nadezhda reflects. “You must understand that everyone who took to the streets was afraid of being arrested, beaten, simply ‘disappeared’. But we understood that music really supports people and gives them strength. So we did it. And people answered us with gratitude. It was a very strong sense of solidarity.”

On the eve of the presidential election in early August, a pair of state-employed sound engineers, Kirill Galanov and Vladislav Sokolovsky, were arrested at a pro-government rally in Minsk and later imprisoned after going rogue and playing Changes over the public address system with their fists in the air. In videos viewed millions of times on social media, the crowd – which contained many supporters of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya – can be heard clapping and singing along as officials scramble to pull the plug.

“This is just mental,” responds Masha Zinevitch angrily, when asked about what happened to Galanov and Sokolovsky. “In this situation these DJ guys are very brave, and we thank them for risking their freedom and expressing their love and support to the people of Belarus. Everybody who was at that event was

very happy to hear that song at a government-held rally. It was incredible. Unfortunately, they had to leave Belarus for now due to the risk of persecution.

“The police here look and act more like an organised crime group,” Zinevitch adds. “They cover their faces and don’t wear a uniform. They can just grab you from the streets and put you in a van without any explanations. That’s very scary.”

Zinevitch is the singer with Dlina Volny, a Minsk-based synth-pop band signed to cult American record label Italians Do It Better. They’ve shown support for the movement in Belarus with the release of their own protest song *Whatever Happens Next* – a brooding, spine-tingling call-to-arms with lyrics such as “Whatever is coming our way, we can fight it back!” Zinevitch speaks of how Tsoi and Changes are an inspiration to Dlina Volny, not only politically but also musically. “It’s everything we, personally, love about post-punk,” she says. “It’s dark and moody but energetic and uplifting in its own way at the same time. The perfect protest song.”

What happens next in Belarus remains far from certain as Lukashenko continues to cling to power and his backers Russia threaten intervention to prop him up. Yet the people continue to protest, despite the risks. To understand why, it’s worth noting that Lukashenko has been in power since 1994, longer than many young Belarusians have been alive. “I was born under the current government and I don’t know how to live under another,” remarks Ganna Guzik, a finance professional, of a corrupt and brutal regime in her country which she likens to the mafia.

“One thing is clear: people are tired,” she adds. “We want freedom. We want changes. Our patience has reached the limit. The Belarusian people are very united now. That is why the song Changes, although not a Belarusian national one, has again become a cult song.”

If the legacy of Tsoi’s Changes teaches us anything, Guzik points out, it’s that change is possible. “When my parents were young, they listened to these songs,” she says, “went to these concerts, participated in demonstrations during the collapse of the USSR – and during the first independent elections.”

All of which would probably have confounded Viktor Tsoi had he lived to see it. While driving back from an early-morning fishing trip in Latvia in August 1990, the most un-rock’n’roll of superstars’ car collided head-on with a bus, presumably after he had nodded off at the wheel (conspiracy theorists seek the shadowy hand of the KGB in his death, but all evidence suggests it was an accident). A huge outpouring of public grief followed. From the St Petersburg boiler room where he once shovelled coal to Almaty in Kazakhstan, Sevastopol in the Crimea and central

Minsk, shrines across the former Soviet states commemorate Tsoi. Yet nothing embodies his memory like his music.

“It is awesome that ‘Peremen’ has taken on a life of its own, that people feel this song in their souls,” reflects Tsoi’s close friend Joanna Stingray. “I believe Viktor would be amused by the path his song has taken. He told me he wanted his lyrics to help people break out and do something they want to do and not be trapped. In that regard, if Peremen energises people in Belarus or anywhere else to go and stand up and fight for things they want, he would be proud.”

‘It’s dark but also uplifting. The perfect protest song’

Red Wave: An American in the Soviet Music Underground by Joanna Stingray and Madison Stingray is published on September 22 (DoppelHouse Press, £20) @MBJack



‘Our hearts demand changes’
Thirty years after his death, the Tsoi Wall in Moscow is still a site of pilgrimage