

The BLOG: Culture

Viktor Tsoi and underground Soviet Rock

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For most of the Soviet Union's existence there were two types of musicians: those who worked for Melodiya, the state-run recording company, and the bards, those who recorded and performed underground, unwilling to let the government compromise their art. The bands who recorded on Melodiya inevitably wound up as generic, unthreatening pop, whereas the underground groups embraced subversive lyricism and western-influenced rock and roll.

The Soviet Union, 1981, the Leningrad Rock Club opens under the supervision of the KGB. The intent was to create a center for music that would be government controlled, and therefore prevented from causing controversy. But contrary to their wishes, the club grew to become a haven for musicians where they could discuss, hear and perform subversive,

western-style rock music.

Young Leningrad State University students Boris Grebenshchikov and Anatoly Gunitsky formed their band Aquarium in 1972, becoming one of the earliest Soviet rock bands. Throughout the seventies they were forced to play underground venues, usually in people's apartments, because of the Soviet government's anti-rock stance.

Aquarium, an older Soviet rock band than Kino, can be credited with helping expand and popularize the rock scene in the USSR. They began recording on home equipment, and many of the reel-to-reels of their earliest recordings were lost. Lead singer Boris Grebenshchikov would eventually meet American singer Joanna Stingray, who was instrumental in exporting Soviet rock to the US, particularly with aiding and producing the release of the compilation album *Red Wave: 4 Underground Bands from the Soviet Union*, released in 1986. This record showcased three of the founding bands of Soviet Rock: Aquarium, Kino and Alisa, along with the more obscure group Strange Games.

However, by the late 80s the emerging 'glasnost' policy gradually allowed for more freedom and experimentation for Soviet artists, who took full advantage of the government's new focus on cultural development and were finally able to perform in the open. Aquarium's first official album, released on the

state-owned Melodiya label, was a massive hit in the USSR. Their success was well-earned and long overdue, but other equally talented and prolific Soviet Rock bands unfortunately never achieved the same level of success.

Kino, led by the charismatic singer Viktor Tsoi, got their start in 1981 when Tsoi witnessed Boris Grebenshchikov play in Petergof. After meeting up with Grebenshchikov after the show, Tsoi managed to perform a few songs for him on the train back to Leningrad. Grebenshchikov was so impressed by his talent, singing style, and lyrical prowess that he eventually helped Tsoi assemble a band. Tsoi would soon become regarded as a poet who captured the melancholy of life under Soviet rule.

Although Kino had some success in the early 80s, it wasn't until the mid-80s that they broke out, along with Aquarium and a few other bands. With Tsoi's personal lyrics and the group's accessible sound, they became Soviet icons. Their most popular and lasting release, *Gruppa Krovi*, was released in 1988. After moderate success and popularity with their previous releases, this album, which means "Blood Type," introduced them to the western world when it was released in America by Capital Records in 1989. The title track and their lead single, "Gruppa Krovi," was their anti-war anthem, albeit a subtle one. The song has become ingrained in Russian culture, and to this day remains a beloved classic in the former Soviet

states.

Kino was perhaps the only Soviet rock group during this time that gained recognition throughout the Soviet Union as well as satellite states. Their appearance on the 1986 “Red Wave” compilation introduced them to an international audience. In 1986 it sold 10,000 albums in California, introducing these bands to the West.

Unfortunately, in 1990, Viktor Tsoi was killed in a car accident just after finishing recording the vocals for what would be Kino’s final album. His death was national news. It was widely known that Tsoi was an inspiration to millions of Soviet youths, and his death was crushing to many. To this day his image has persisted in Russia and around the world. In Moscow there is a large graffiti mural dedicated to him, and more murals can be found in other former Soviet states, particularly Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Presumably due to his Korean heritage, Tsoi has also become a popular figure in South Korea. Notably, popular Korean rock group YB covered “Gruppa Krovi.”

The music of Soviet Rock was directly inspired by western rock. Aquarium has specifically cited classic British pop-rock like the Beatles, and glam rock like David Bowie, T. Rex and Roxy Music. Kino, by contrast, was formed later and more inspired by 80’s acts like U2, The Smiths and The Cure.

Soviet Rock used simple pop-rock song structure, with a focus on the lyrics and vocals, especially in Kino. Tsoi's vocals were usually doubled in the mix, making them the center of the song. He usually used melancholic verses to build up to a powerful, anthemic, hopeful chorus. Backed by the rhythmic, jangly guitar melodies inspired by western 80s guitarists like Johnny Marr, and prominent baselines akin to The Cure, Tsoi's vocals were given the space prominence in their recordings to accentuate the immediacy and beauty of his lyrics.

Kino, Aquarium and the other Soviet bands featured on the "Red Wave" compilation continue to act as a blueprint for rock music in Russia. Viktor Tsoi's lyrics with Kino especially continue to reverberate among Russian youths who, although the Soviet Union collapsed, continue to be culturally repressed by their current government. One of his songs in particular comes to mind, as the chorus goes, "but if there's a pack of cigarettes in my pocket/Then the day's not all that bad." Russians continue to endure numerous hardships, but have found solace in music, and their songs resonate with us to this day.