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When Bob Dylan Came to Russia : Singer-Songwriters and the Emergence of Rock Poetry in 1970s Leningrad: Kun Bob Dylan tuli Venäjälle : Laulaja-lauluntekijät ja rockrunouden synty 1970-luvun Leningradissa

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When Bob Dylan came to Russia.
Singer-Songwriters and the Emergence of Rock Poetry in 1970s Leningrad

Tomi Huttunen

Abstract

The article discusses Bob Dylan's influence on the late Soviet Russian culture, i.e. the Leningrad rock music and culture, as well as Dylan's reception in the early stages of the Russian language rock poetry. I analyse adaptations of Dylan's songs in the 1970s – 1980s rock songs by Mikhail Naumenko and Boris Grebenschikov, especially concentrating on their joint project, the unofficially recorded *magnitizdat* album *Vse bratya – syostry* (All the Brothers are Sisters, 1978) and the various intertextual strategies applied by these poets in creating the basis for the Leningrad rock poetry genre.

When Bob Dylan came to Russia

In the summer of 1972, a 19-year-old mathematics student, a beginning singer-songwriter named Boris Grebenshikov and his friend, a drummer and theatre student named Anatoly Gunitsky, were wandering around Leningrad thinking of a suitable name for their band, which consisted of just the two of them. Typical of those years in Leningrad, they had already given themselves Anglo-American nicknames. Anatoly was 'George' Gunitsky, because Grebenshikov had decided

he looked like George Harrison (Burlaka 2007, vol. 1: 254). Boris was 'Bob' Grebenshikov, since he had heard Bob Dylan on the radio and admired him. After a couple of hours wandering around the city, they decided to call their band *Akvarium* (Aquarium). Eventually, it would be one of the most legendary of all Soviet Russian unofficial rock groups.

George Gunitsky's nickname has remained the same until today, and it emphasises the importance of George Harrison for the Leningrad rock scene. Of the four Beatles, George was somewhat surprisingly the most important member of the band in Leningrad in the 1970s. During this period of imitation culture, it was typical of the Leningrad youth scene to look for doubles in Anglo-American popular music and culture. Folk singer Olga Pershina was called Leningrad's Joan Baez, and she was, like her own idol, a talented guitar player and performed cover songs of Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and Baez, being the owner of 'a strong folk voice and cinematographic good looks' (Burlaka 2007, vol. 3: 26). In February of 1976, an important birthday festival dedicated to George Harrison was held in the city. Pershina performed at the festival, as did Grebenshikov. In fact, Grebenshikov's first ever written song bore the title *Vsio dolzhno proiti,* which translates as 'All Things Must Pass', as in the name of George Harrison's triple solo album released in 1970. Later in the 1970s, George Harrison's birthday became the most important festival date for the Leningrad rock scene

Boris Grebenshikov is the most literary rock poet in the Soviet rock scene. He considers himself a bridge between Western culture and Russian culture (see Draper 2015). Asked about his literary sources in the 1970s, he had the following to say in an interview: 'The first half of the 1970s we read anything that we could find in literary journals, like *Inostrannaja literatura* (Foreign literature) and *Moskva* (Moscow). We had a certain literary diet. In the second half of the 1970s,

we received a lot of English literature from American students: that was the time of Zen-Buddhism, Carlos Castaneda, Tolkien, Robert Graves and so on. We did not take part in any literary groups, since they were elite. At that time, we all read everything that was published.' (Huttunen 2012: 28–29). The journal *Inostrannaja literatura* was definitely a key source of information for the generation born in the 1950s: it published translations of Baudelaire, Beckett, Camus, Ionesco and Faulkner (Vasilizhenko & Udler 2009: 98). The notion about not belonging to any literary groups was, in fact, not terribly accurate, since there is evidence that Grebenshikov took part in a literary circle called Klub-81, as part of its musical department. Klub-81 was a group of alternative poets gathering at the Dostoevsky Memorial Museum in Leningrad since 1981, accepted by the KGB as part of a pseudo-liberal cultural politics in that same year. When Grebenshikov was later persecuted by KGB officials, the Klub-81 members sent a letter to the KGB in his defence (Ivanov 2015: 129). The artistic director of the club was Alexander Kan, today an art and culture correspondent at the BBC World Service.

However, much more important for Grebenshikov and other rock musicians was the fact that the Leningrad Rock Club, the first ever in the USSR, began its activities that same year (1981), also with the help of KGB and Komsomol officials. Institutionally, it was a project overseen by Leningrad city officials together with amateur rock musicians, such as Grebenshikov. Leningradsky rok-klub (Leningrad Rock Club) was founded at Rubinstein Street 13, and the first ever concert took place on 7 March 1981. At that time, according to Artemiy Troitsky (1991: 75), there were approximately 50 unofficial rock groups in Leningrad wanting to get on stage at the Leningrad Rock Club.

Grebenshikov, who often bears the title 'the Bob Dylan of Russia' (McGrane 2014; Draper 2015), has himself defined Dylan as his lighthouse, showing him the way, and as a point of imitation for his own poetic activities. According to him, Dylan was 'an unappreciated poet, definitely deserving the second spot after Shakespeare' (Smirnov 1999: 53). For him, it was obvious that Dylan's reality was completely different from the Leningrad surroundings, even though Grebenshikov himself had never been outside the Soviet Union. However, the essential things described in the songs were common. It was highly typical of Soviet rock in the 1980s to copy melodies, titles and motives from Anglo-American rock songs. However, one artist made this imitation his own art form. Mikhail 'Mike' Naumenko specialised in translating and transforming Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Chuck Berry and Marc Bolan into the Russian language and into late Soviet Russian culture in general.

Mike Naumenko was not a typical figure in the Leningrad rock scene. He knew English quite well, since he had been to an English school and had a special interest in English philology. Thus, he was able to read the rock magazines and he even made some of his living by translating texts, such as biographies from *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Melody Maker* or *Guitar Player* (Smirnov 1999: 58; Burlaka 2007, vol. 2: 400). It was possible to buy these magazines from the black market suppliers (*fartsovschiki*) in the middle of Nevsky Prospect, especially in the arcade of the Gostiny Dvor department store. *Fartsovschik* is an argot term for the illegal business conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, referring to the buying of such consumer goods as jeans, chewing gum, bananas, stockings, vinyl records, cassette tapes, music magazines, and so forth, from foreigners. Finns constituted an important group of foreign tourists in Leningrad. The term 'turmalay(nen)' was used in Leningrad at the time to refer to Finnish tourists, representing a combination of the words 'tur' (as in tourist) and '(suo)malai(nen)'. Boris

Grebenshikov used the notion of 'turmalay' in his 1971 play in verse *Embraced by Jeans*, dedicated to the illegal business of buying jeans from the Finnish tourists.

Mike Naumenko first performed at George Harrison's annual birthday festival in Leningrad in 1977. His first brief amateur group bore the name The Union of Rock Music Lovers (*Soiuz Ljubitelei Muzyki Rok*). Soon thereafter, in 1978, he became famous in Leningrad rock music circles for making an unofficial tape together with Boris Grebenshikov. This tape also served as a gateway for Bob Dylan's later arrival in the Soviet Union.

The joint recording made by these two artists bore the title *Vse bratya – sestry* (All brothers are sisters). It was an archaic – in the sense of tape quality – reel-to-reel tape made with a Majak-202 or, according to some sources, Elektronika-302 Soviet reel tape recorder. They recorded the tape outside, since Grebenshikov had decided that all walls only harm the process of recording. Thus, they created a studio along the Neva River near the Smolny Institute. Even though archaic in its soundscape, this tape became the first ever unofficial rock album made in Leningrad, including for the first time a certain concept of content, a selected set of songs, a special cover design (by the photographer Andrey 'Willy' Usov) and even sound producers (Marat Airapetyan and Mikhail Fainshtein) and two independent rock poets as its authors.

More important, the authors dedicated all the songs on *Vse bratya – sestry* to 'the Acoustic Daughter and the Great White Wonder', meaning Grebenshikov's new-born daughter and Bob Dylan's bootleg character. The latter was an obvious reference to Dylan and at the same time to the recording circumstances, because the album *Great White Wonder* (1969) existed as a famous unofficial bootleg

compilation, and was eventually released as *The Basement Tapes* (McMichael 2005: 666). *Great White Wonder* has even been characterised as the first notable bootleg album ever made. Thus, it serves as an accurate point of reference for Grebenshikov's and Naumenko's album. In the Soviet Union, making basement recordings (*magnitizdat* tapes) was the only chance for the unofficial artists to make albums, as the first official Soviet long play album by an unofficial rock band was only published in 1986 (Aquarium's *White Album*). 'We were listening to Dylan's songs', says Grebenshikov, 'and thought: "He is describing these things that are very well known to us". Then we would do some kind of trick, maybe a key line, and everything would turn upside down to our own reality, which was radically different from the Dylan songs. He was singing about New York, about his life, while we were singing about our St Petersburg. It may be that the songs were built in the same way, but everything else seemed like a weather forecast there and here' (Kushnir 1999: 67).

The same tribute to Dylan is apparent in the album's back cover photo, a photo showing Grebenshikov holding a yellow-covered copy of Dylan's *Writings & Drawings* (published in 1973), which he had found, to his own surprise, in a bookshop on Liteiny Street in Leningrad. The volume was the first collection of Dylan songs published in book format; it included songs from his debut album in 1962 and continued until his 1971 collection of *Greatest Hits, Volume 2*, but it also included other poems and personal drawings as well. Grebenshikov considered the volume quite valuable and treasured it throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Apart from its dedication to 'the rough riders, ghost poets, low-down rounders, sweet lovers, sad-eyed drifters and rainbow angels', the volume included a short introduction. According to it, as the 'Cold War gave way to Grey New World, Dylan observed the passing scene, capturing its tragedies and

lunacies with a devastating razor-edged surrealism that stripped the flesh of hypocrisy from the bones of the grim skeleton of truth' (Dylan 1974: 4). This can



Fig. 1: Back cover photo of *Vse bratya – sestry* by Andrey Usov

easily be rephrased to accurately describe the beginning phase of rock music in Soviet Leningrad, where the Cold War had given way to the Period of Stagnation (*vremya zastoya*) and left Grebenshikov and Naumenko observing the passing scene, capturing its tragedies and lunacies with a devastating razor-edged surrealism.

In its formative stages, Soviet rock was generally dependent on Anglo-American sources. The bands 'copied shamelessly, often without understanding what they were singing about' (McMichael 2008: 202; Troitskij 1987: 35). The work of translating canonical rock texts played a very important role in the emergence of Leningrad rock poetry. However, the pioneering Soviet rock poets Grebenshikov and Naumenko seemed to understand their sources and subtexts quite well. In the careful planning that went into the complete *Vse bratya – sestry* album, the album's intertextual co-play with Dylan appears intentional and premeditated.

The first song on the album was Grebenshikov's 'The Rain Theft' (*Ukravshii dozhd*). The song's chords and picking are quite similar to 'Don't Think Twice, It's All Right' from the *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* album. On the other hand, the revealing and strongly irritated ex-friend thematic of the song comes much closer to the song 'Positively 4th Street' from Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*. For instance:

BG:
You laughed at my face, you shot from behind
You threw sand in my eyes.
You made yourself a karma of ten lives ahead.
You thought if two of them are silent
Then the third one also agrees

But you forgot to mention that you shut his mouth.

Dylan:
You gotta a lotta nerve
To say you are my friend
When I was down
You just stood there grinning

Dylan's poetry became an essential part of Grebenshikov's literary diet in the early 1970s. In several cases, his Dylan-like allusions are related to his way of describing the city of Leningrad – St Petersburg. A good example of this is the third song on the album, 'Road 21' (*Doroga 21*)**,** which describes the lyrical hero's controversial attitude towards his home city and, at the same time, his urge to reach Bob Dylan's faraway reality. However, the Soviet Union and Leningrad kept him in a cage of a different making:

BG:
Your eyes are like ash,
You see only what there is.
I've never caught the moon in the river,
But I promise I shall try.
On Road 21, there are plenty of things you can't find here.
I would love to live there, but my heart
Smells of Nevsky Prospekt.

Dylan's album and the song 'Highway 61 Revisited' (1965) are both of importance here. However, Road 21 was in reality the main road between Leningrad and Tallinn, a way to the imaginary West within the Soviet Union. Thus, Bob Dylan's reality remains very far away from this Soviet–Estonian, and

eventually even Finnish, field of juxtapositions. You could hitchhike to Tallinn and be able to see, for example, Finnish television programmes, including the filming of Jimi Hendrix's concert, which – as an example – was highly popular among the Leningrad rock musicians. They were ready to pay their Estonian comrades to get to see the films taped from Finnish television with the help of automatic movie cameras.

The next example of making use of Dylan on the album is Mike Naumenko's song 'Ballad of Crocky, Cookie and Karma', which refers straightforwardly to Dylan's allegoric and aphoristic tale 'The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest', repeating the song both musically and from the point of view of the song's lyrics. The structure of the song repeats that of Dylan's song, adding actual late-70s Leningrad Zen-Buddhist components to the moral of the song at the end:

> Dylan:
>
> *The moral of this song*
> *Is simply that one should never be*
> *Where one does not belong.*
> *So when you see your neighbor carryin' somethin'*
> *Help him with his load*
> *And don't go mistaking Paradise*
> *For that home across the road*
>
> Mike:
> *There's a moral for this song and its meaning is simple:*
> *Don't stick your nose in strange cookies or you'll lose it.*
> *And if you go somewhere, watch where you're going,*

And the main thing – remember, that there is no fighting against your karma!

However, a more obvious Dylan quotation adapted by Mike Naumenko for this album was titled *Zhenschina*, which translates as 'Woman', but he was not referring in this case to John Lennon. The immediate subtext is once again Dylan and his 'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands', which he wrote for his wife Sara and released on the album *Blonde on Blonde*. Naumenko's version of it is only 3 minutes 55 seconds long, while Dylan's original was 11 minutes 22 seconds long and covered the complete 4th side of the double album. Both songs make use of King Solomon's Song of Songs in the Old Testament and draw their similes from the Bible:

Dylan:
With your mercury mouth in the missionary times
And your eyes like smoke and prayers like rhymes
And your silver cross and your voice like chimes
Oh, who among them do they think could bury you?

Mike Naumenko's song is a rough translation and transformation of these similes, and he even develops the romantic images more in the spirit of the four Gospels of the New Testament:

Mike:
Your flesh is like bread, your blood is like wine,
And the pages of your letters are iron,
Your dreams are prayers, your eyes glass and your humiliation flattering,
But who among us could surprise you?

The next of Grebenshikov's songs on the album was called *Peski Peterburga* (St Petersburg Sands), and once again, while describing his home city of Leningrad he relies on a Dylan quotation. Melodically, *Peski Peterburga* is reminiscent of the song 'My Back Pages' from the album *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). However, this time the lyrical subtext is much closer in time, since the song lyrics seem to refer to Dylan's song 'Isis' from the album *Desire*, released in 1976. In particular, the dialogue within the song proves transparent:

BG:
You asked, 'Who?' I answered 'Me'
And I didn't think it was too proud.
You asked, 'Where', I said 'With you,
if there's anything out there'.
You asked, 'What if?' and I was quiet,
relying on somebody's home.
You said, 'I'm lying', I said 'OK,
it's nicer to do it together'.
They asked me: 'Are you alive?'
I said, 'With her – yes!'

Dylan:
She said, 'Where ya been?' I said, 'No place special'
She said, 'You look different'. I said, 'Well, not quite'
She said, 'You been gone'. I said, 'That's only natural'
She said, 'You gonna stay?' I said, 'If you want me to, yes!'

The 1978 album *Vse bratya – sestry* did not yet translate into any great popularity for the two beginning performing artists. According to their memoirs, they managed to make a maximum of 20 copies of the tape themselves, with cover

photos and so forth, and they sold these copies after their unofficial apartment concerts (*kvartirnik*). According to the practices of the *magnitizdat* culture, those tapes later spread outside the Soviet Union in thousands of copies made by the listeners themselves. However, the late 1970s still constituted the formative period in the Leningrad rock music scene. The real fame that came with being a rock musician had to wait several years. Grebenshikov's band Aquarium would become well known in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s, after their scandalous concert performance in Tbilisi. Naumenko's band Zoopark would also gain popularity in Leningrad and other parts of the country after the first releases of the group's unofficial albums, especially after Naumenko's widely famous *Sladkaja N* (Sweet N, 1980).

As to Dylanisms, in Grebenshikov's case the year 1978 seems to be full of Bob Dylan allusions. After the joint album and the major tribute to Dylan, he continued writing new songs clearly influenced by Dylan, and with success. The song *Stal'* ('Steel') became one of his most celebrated works and, at the same time, drew strongly from several of Dylan's songs. He himself defines it as a '100% Dylan song'. Another song, *Pochemu ne padaet nebo* ('Why Doesn't the Sky Fall') is also one of his all-time favourites and closely related to Dylan's poetics. The song title *Uidesh svoim putem* translates as 'You Go Your Way', and it refers to Dylan's song 'Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine'. Then, the lyrics of the song *Nam vsem budet luchshe*, which can be translated as 'When the Ship Comes In, Everybody's Happy', refer to Dylan's song 'When the Ship Comes In' (*Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*). Finally, the song *Stuchat'sja v dveri travy* can be translated not as 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door', but as 'Knockin' on Grass's Door'. Grebenshikov continued using Dylan's songs also in the 1980s as well as later in his career. A significant example of this is his album *Lilith* (1998), which was recorded with Dylan's former group, The Band (Garth Hudson, Rick

Danko, Jim Weider and Randy Ciarlante; later, Harvey Brooks also took part in the sessions). The songs on the album were greatly influenced by Dylan's oeuvre and manner of singing, and as a complete volume it serves as a huge homage to Dylan. The first song *Esli by ne ty* borrows its very title from Dylan's song 'If Not For You', while the song *Ten'* ('Shadow') refers to Dylan's 'What Was It You Wanted?', and the song *Moj drug doktor* ('My Friend, the Doctor') recalls Dylan's song 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues'.

Mike Naumenko also continued throughout the 1980s to be immensely influenced by Western rock music, and especially by Bob Dylan. Thus, he made use of Dylan's song 'Idiot Wind' (*Blood on the Tracks*) in his song *Zolotye l'vy* ('Golden Lions'). Naumenko took the song's melody and repeated it almost without any changes. However, the text appears to be a free adaptation of Dylan's song, moving rather far away from the original text's intentions. Lexical similarities are obvious, and Naumenko seems to have found equivalents to Dylan's style and manners, while 'at the same time reinforcing the intonation space of Russian rock' (Gnedovskij 1998: 190).

Probably the most famous song of Mike Naumenko's career was called *Prigorodnyi bljuz*, which translates as 'Subterranean Blues', and thus it refers to Dylan's song 'Subterranean Homesick Blues':

> Dylan:
> *Johnny's in the basement*
> *Mixing up the medicine*
> *I'm on the pavement*
> *Thinking about the government*
> *The man in the trench coat*

Badge out, laid off
Says he's got a bad cough
Wants to get it paid off...

Naumenko accepts the original idea and offers his own version of hallucinations, where the rhythm and melody are once again more straightforward than in the original and the lyrics without any of the complex symbolism typical of Dylan. Musically, his version is closer to the work of Chuck Berry than to Dylan. The final verse of Naumenko's song is also essentially Russian in its themes. This is why, according to Gnedovskij (1998: 194), almost nobody noticed that the song was originally taken from Dylan:

Naumenko:
I'm sitting in the loo and reading Rolling Stone
Venichka is spilling moonshine in the kitchen.
Vera sleeps in the attic, though the tape recorder blares,
Time to wake her up, but that'd be bad manners.

However, Naumenko's text has a second subtext just as important for the interpretation of these lines. Dylan's Johnny has become the alcoholic Venichka, who is, in fact, the literary hero of the underground writer Venedikt Erofeev, the author of a prosaic longer poem called *Moscow to the End of the Line*, a highly intertextual *samizdat* piece from the early 1970s. Erofeev was Naumenko's favourite writer (Naumenko 1996: 279), whose work was banned in the Soviet Union. Naumenko read Erofeev's work in his youth and used to quote the text (Domanskij 2010: 45). The unofficial copies of the prosaic poem were very popular in the underground during the 1970s and 1980s. The combination of

Dylan and Erofeev produces here an adequate adaptation of foreign expressive vehicles with the help of Russian contemporary literature.

In 1983, Mike Naumenko wrote his epic song, called *Uezdnyi gorod N* ('Provincial Town N'), in a Nikolai Gogol-like manner, which describes a peripheral town with strange literary personas appearing from different places and different times in history. It is easy to see the similarity with Dylan's 'Desolation Row' in both the melody and in the text of the song. This time both the original song Dylan and Naumenko's version of it are lengthy. Dylan's song is 11 minutes long, while Mike's song is 14 minutes long. More importantly, the context of the Russian literary canon becomes decisive in Naumenko's way of transforming Dylan's poetics into Russian:

> Dylan:
> *Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood*
> *With his memories in a trunk*
> *Passed this way an hour ago*
> *With his friend, a jealous monk*

Naumenko transforms this idea into Russian with the help of classical Russian literature from the 19th century:

> Naumenko:
> *There is Gogol, disguised as Pushkin,*
> *Rushing, as always, to the casino.*
> *But he won't make it across the square –*
> *Julius Caesar is shooting a film there.*

These lines should be read with at least double, if not triple, encoding. Pushkin's place in the provincial town is taken by Gogol, which is easy to explain with the help of the history of literature. In the canonical history of Russian literature, Gogol always comes after Pushkin, continuing along the trail that Pushkin had blazed. Secondly, the motif of gambling, in turn, refers to the third inevitable mythological St Petersburg writer, meaning Dostoevsky, who is the great gambler in Russian literature. First, we have the original line from Dylan's rather absurd name-dropping song, onomastically intertextual by nature. Dylan's song also lists three figures: Einstein, Robin Hood and a jealous monk. They are translated into Pushkin, Gogol and Dostoevsky, whose appearance is thus implicit. However, as we can see, Naumenko immediately departs from his source text in translating the song into Russian. Dylan's words 'disguised as' in Naumenko's Russian translation (*odetyi, kak*) are a reference to the master of Soviet Russian absurd literature, Daniil Kharms, and the tradition of absurd anecdotes about Russian writers of the nineteenth century. These anecdotes found followers in early 1970s underground (*samizdat*) literature, which were widely disseminated in Leningrad circles close to Mike Naumenko. For instance, the listener should read these lines in comparison with popular anecdotes about Gogol, who is disguised as Pushkin and yet goes to visit Pushkin. When Pushkin opens the door, he shouts to his governess, well known to those familiar with Pushkin's biography: 'Come and see, Arina Rodionovna, it is me who came!' The operation carried out in Naumenko's text is typically related to both the history of Russian literature and the history of Western rock music – the two main sources of Leningrad rock poetry and the emergence of its own language.

As we can see, in the cases of these two authors – Grebenshikov and Naumenko, both classics of Leningrad rock poetry – in the early stages of their careers, the simple practice of quoting Dylan's songs, phrases, motives (musical and poetic),

or images, developed from the technique of imitation into a more complex mechanism of intertextuality. At the same time, these mechanisms of polygenetic quotation (Grebenshikov), or multi-coded intertextual orchestration (Naumenko), appear as guiding techniques in their personal song writing more generally. Eventually, their song writing not only quotes from Dylan, but makes use of foreign textual material in general. On the other hand, this kind of free adaptation of foreign sources and alien texts, motives, chords, melodies and images is apparent in and highly typical of Bob Dylan's art (see Gray 2000). Therefore, it is possible to follow a transfer of not only textual material, but also textual practices in the case of Dylan's first appearance in Russia during the formative period of Leningrad rock poetry.

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