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Rockin' Russia

The opening lyrics of the Beatles' "Girl," ask if anyone would "listen to [the] story all about the girl who came to say..." Well, the "girl" in question could very well be the infectious sound of Rock-and-Roll which, along with the imported songs of the Beatles and other legendary Western Rock bands, invaded Russia and left an unforgettable mark on its social and political history. Like its Western counterpart, Russian Rock music dared to say what people only yearned to, reveling in a sense of cultural revolution with every passionate word and strum of the guitar. Urging hope and prosperity for the future, Rock music blended different styles together in the spirit of cooperation and union. Moreover, through powerful and carefully layered lyrics and potent imagery, specifically seen in the songs of Mashina Vremeni and Nautilus Pompilius, Rock spoke the truth about Russia's state as a troubled nation, bravely stating that only through care and love does Russia stand a chance to survive. Furthermore, the uplifting ideals of Rock continue across mediums, for as Rock enters a new century, it continues to inspire, but through different platforms like popular Russian films, thus ensuring that its inspiring truths embrace and educate all who seek any means of progressive change.

The majority of Russian Rock songs work on numerous levels, expressing complex ideas and meaningful statements on current issues and events ("Russian Rock"). Mashina Vremeni, one of the pioneering bands of Russian Rock, was incredibly successful at commenting on socio-political issues, while simultaneously delivering memorable and entertaining songs. In their classic song, "Наш Дом" (translation: "Our House"), the opening lyrics describe how the "годы летят стрелою" ("years fly by like an arrow"), but "скоро" ("soon") the speaker and his love will "из города уйдут" ("finally leave town"), and, like the title suggests, build a "дом" (home)

that they will both truly love. The house, in fact, would be surrounded by “тишина” (“silence”) like a “стена” (“wall”), but beyond that wall, there is thankfully “хватит места” (“enough space”) for this man and woman to comfortably live in. Regarding this new construction, the narrator optimistically yearns to “покрепче справить двери” (“tighten the door”) and other such activities essential to making it an ideal home for him and his spouse. Furthermore, the house will block all “горе” (“pain”), and his pleasant new door will allow him “вкопать скамейку...чтобы мог подумать каждый” (“to dig a space for a bench...so anyone would have the freedom to sit and think”). The song’s delightful, rousing melody, coupled with the narrator’s unflinching dedication to all tasks at hand, suggests the theme of reconstruction, taking something which appears desolate and transforming it into a place full of life and prosperity. Moreover, the song, through the narrator’s inviting vocals and infectious enthusiasm, suggests that one could easily accomplish any activity, whether it is “leaving town,” building a bench,” or “tightening the door,” for all it requires is the dedication to make it happen, something the narrator proudly displays in every refrain.

Moreover, the title of “Наш Дом” (“Our House”) is particularly significant, for it emphasizes “our” in its discussion of the titular “house.” Although the “our” in question could refer to the song’s unnamed couple, it simultaneously hints at a more general, common property; the song’s “house” could thus be a home meant for all to live in, a haven of friendship and peaceful habitation. Consequently, the newly built “house” connotes Russia itself, for it too could attain the glory of the song’s loving and harmoniously peaceful ideals. The chorus deliberately repeats that the man and the woman have finally found a “место” (“place”), a true home, for themselves, and the song implies, through the repetition of the comforting “silence” of the chorus and the narrator’s own hopeful vocals, that the two have erected this building under a

spirit of love and desired harmony. Thus, the song boldly suggests that any goal could be realized, much like any house could be rebuilt, and all it takes is the conscious effort to make it happen. Mashina Vremeni, with this sly but beautiful agenda, urges the notion of cooperation and kindness for all Russian citizens, mirroring the hopeful and productive couple at the center of this song. In their eyes, Russia could very well become the ideal home of the song's rousing musical score, and, in a mutual effort for progress and prosperity, the Russian people could learn to love and live with one another under the common cause of a safe home for all and the proverbial roof of the song's inspiring "house."

The band Nautilus Pompilius remains immensely popular to this day, especially due to their contributions to the soundtrack of Aleksei Balabanov's successful action film Брат (Brother). Similar to Mashina Vremeni, Nautilus Pompilius explored vital social issues, aided by stunning musical cues and deceptively simple, catchy lyrics. Their song "Крылья" ("Wings") explores the relationship between a man and the emotionally damaged love of his life. At the start of the song, as she "снимает вечернее платье" ("she takes off her evening dress"), the man is stunned to notice "шрамы" ("scars"), bruises that taint the girl's natural beauty and almost make the man to want "плакать" ("to cry"). Throughout the song, in a compelling chorus, the man consistently asks "где [ее] крылья, которые нравились мне?" ("where are [her] wings that I so much liked before?") The woman may have been abused physically (another social problem granted its deserved attention), but the specific nature of her problem remains purposefully vague. The woman and the man are never even granted names, all in an effort to increase their anonymity, and to present their problems on a universal tableau.

In addition, the lost "wings" of "Крылья" could refer to the Fallen Angels, beings once placed on a mighty pedestal, and who, through an excess of pride and the tempting leadership of

a rebellious, selfish soul (this being Lucifer, the once heralded figure of “light”) plummeted to years of misery and an eternity of shame and fallen glory. Like the grandiose Fallen Angels, the woman has lost her “wings” as well, but, here, these facets were aspects of her personality, her sense of hope and life; she thus lost her ability to soar, to fly above everything in an effort make her life something truly special and unique. The song, aided by a haunting and heartbreaking instrumental score, focuses on the misery of these two lovers, good people destroyed by a constant “война” (“war”) in their nation. However, this is not a “war” that destroys lives through weapons and arms, but one that robs them of their very personality and dreams. These people live a fate quite similar to the rebellious Angels in Hell, a life of no hope and only further misery.

“Крылья” comments on the current state of life in Russia, in which millions of people are reduced to distressing existences, but, nonetheless, a message of hope still prevails in the music. The man and the woman may be miserable, but, in the end, they still have each other’s company to weather any problems that may come their way. Indeed, at one point the man even states that if “[они] погибнут” (“[they] die”), they will do so together, which is emphasized by a prominent “мы” (“we”) in the final refrain, implying that their bond will last until the end of their days. Furthermore, the question of what happened to the girl’s “wings,” consistently asked in the chorus, is never given a conclusive answer, suggesting perhaps that the resolution may still be found. The song’s closing lyrics offer no closure, instead describing a great “пожар” (“fire”) that kills both the protagonist and his love, but in its ambiguity, the song offers a faint degree of hope. No matter what destruction and pain this couple may endure (personified by the song’s purging “fire”), they will do so together, and the song implies that the force of love and close human contact could help one survive their harsh, daily existence. The song thus ends on this

slight positive note, suggesting that, much like the man remaining close to his damaged love, no one is alone in whatever problems they face. And while no long-term answer may be in sight, all problems can be fixed (a point given further credence by a robust, sudden surge of instrumental strings in the song's score after the final line of lyrics), and the first step involves embracing your fellow man and healing the wounds inflicted by society in the nurturing and hope-giving power of love.

Nautilus Pompilius' song "Титаник" compares Russia to the ill-fated ocean liner. Specifically, it focuses on how the rich are pampered and uncaring on the upper levels of the ship, and fail to see that their ship is sinking, while the poor consistently suffer down below. The lyrics even specify that the rich power elite are an unfeeling, anonymous bunch, for they are simply "на палубе... танцуют" ("dancing on the upper floor") to a lavish "оркестр" ("orchestra") and "разливают ликер по бокалам" ("pouring liquor into their glasses") as everyone below them struggles for their lives. Furthermore, the song stresses how, even as water steadily floods the room and destroys the lower decks, the rich do not even perceive it, for they are far too enamored of lethargically watching "как плавится лед" ("how the ice melts in their glasses"); the elite do not wish "думать о том" ("to think about") their impending destruction "пока Титаник плывет" ("while the Titanic still floats"). However, despite this dichotomy between the classes, the song bluntly states that, regarding the rich, "каждый из них умрет" ("every one of them will die") later as well, only they fail to realize this. Thus, Nautilus Pompilius attack the rigid class structure and disunity of Russia for its utterly impractical nature, stressing once and for all that a catastrophe, much like the fated sinking of the Titanic, affects everyone equally, and the Russian people must understand this if they hope to make any change for the future.

Moreover, the narration in “Титаник” is delivered by an unnamed observer, one who witnesses the struggles of every class on every floor of the ship. The narrator (in an imposing male voice) states that he went to the quarters of the “капитан” (“captain”) first to “попрощаться с [ним] и с [его] кораблем” (“to say goodbye to [him] and [his] ship”), and, following that, he raced to the lower decks to greet the “гражданин начальник крыс” (“lord of the rats”); his indiscriminate tone thus grants equal authority to both the upper levels of society, personified by the captain, and the struggling lower levels, visualized by “lord of the rats,” ironically given a proper title for something as filthy as dealing with rats. In essence, this man is the common person, highlighted by his nonchalant attitude regarding the ship’s rigid class structures, and one who perhaps understands that class and titles are irrelevant in a crisis such as this, and all that truly matters is individual human lives. This man sees everyone in a decidedly neutral light, and his subtle wish for “надежда спастись” (“hope to escape”) implies that the people on the ship could learn to work together for the common cause of their own survival. In addition, the song has a remarkably upbeat and Rock-and-Roll tempo, thus underlying the raw power and vital commentary of the song’s lyrics. Pointing out perhaps Russia’s own nonchalant mindset, the song’s rhythm only emphasizes the inherent problems underneath and the powerful ideas of harmony and understanding that must be placed out into the open. “Титаник,” with its bleak focus on disunity and its resulting tragic consequences, urges Russia to recognize its faults and the problems of its people; only through recognition can we truly begin the road to recovery: there is still hope for the people on that ship, and potential survivors must fight for their right to survive. Overall, «Титаник» urges the theme of cooperation and union, for it insinuates that Russia stands as a divided nation (much like the Titanic’s infamous split into two halves), and its people must learn to cooperate and care for one another for Russia to truly progress as a nation.

As the 21st century progresses, Rock music continues to inspire, simultaneously bringing out its ideas on influential platforms such as films. Rock has played an incredibly prominent role in certain popular Russian movies, cementing its messages of hope and possible prosperity. For example, Aleksei Balabanov's Брат (Brother) traces the story of Danila, an ex-soldier who returns home to St. Petersburg only to find his brother immersed in crime, and himself caught in the midst of violence and terror. The soundtrack, composed entirely by Nautilus Pompilius, stresses the themes of truth and, more importantly, the importance of caring for other people. These ideals are the key to a better life, and the music reflects Danila's journey to that understanding; although he is a killer by nature, music helps him understand the inherent greatness of valuing others.

While many perceived the music to signify death, for the songs of Nautilus Pompilius play whenever Danila kills someone or manufactures his own weapons, the course of the film proves otherwise. In two key scenes, music provides Danila with the answers to a better life. For example, in one scene, a hoodlum tries to kill Danila, but instead misses and shoots Danila's CD player instead. Music thus saved Danila's life and gave him a second chance to reevaluate his priorities and finally become a better person. Furthermore, in a later scene, Danila walks in to an apartment and sees people having a wonderful time and lovingly playing their music. These people amaze Danila, for their life is simple, pure, and beautiful; they have the capacity and ability to love, unlike the constant violence and terrors that plague Danila. This scene was a key turning point for our hero, for he realized then that this is the life he has always wanted, and the peoples' music helps him reach that epiphany. Also, two members of Nautilus Pompilius were in that apartment, further proving that music is the key to a better, more enjoyable life. In real life, Rock musicians had to fight for their music to be heard, and for people to appreciate

what they had to offer. Similarly, Danila had to endure pain and hardship before he could realize the true and just path he needed to undertake, and Rock music was there to help him at every step of the way.

For a more recent example, the soundtrack for the Russian science-fiction/fantasy blockbuster Дневной Дозор (Day Watch) is made up of some of the biggest names in current Russian Rock, including Gorod 312, ТТ-34, and Kosmos (“Музыка к фильму Дневной Дозор”). Moreover, the film is heavily stylized and relies on extensive visual effects, and yet the powerful Rock soundtrack only emphasizes the film’s old-fashioned core premise of the forces of good versus evil. Rock music is present as the story’s heroes have fun, leap impossible bounds and triumph over the forces of adversity. The values of love and hope may be subtle amidst the film’s famous pyrotechnics, but in the end the story’s heroes prevail, evil is vanquished (however temporarily), and Rock music was there at every crucial juncture to cement its timeless message of the strength of integrity and the stirring quest to make the world a better place for all.

John Lennon and the Beatles really said it best: “All you need is love” (“All You Need Is Love,” The Beatles)! It’s a testament that inspired the earliest Russian Rock bands to speak up and rouse the world, and the message continues to move people to this day. While the songs stress the numerous problems Russian people face on a daily basis, the underlying message is that all problems can be solved, and that Russia, as a nation, can discover the right choices if it puts forth the effort to do so. By caring for its people and bringing back the ideals of honesty and sympathy, Russia can once again rise as an admirable nation. Thus, the themes of care, love, truth, and hope are alive in every Rock song, and Rock music will fight to the very end to make Russia a country truly worth living in.

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