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Did Bob Dylan Shed Tears of Rage in Russia?

By John Freedman

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I thought this was going to be a walk in the park, a piece o' cake, a slam dunk. I have long been looking for a reason to write about two things I appreciate more than anything else — Russian culture and Bob Dylan — and I thought, "What could be easier than whipping off a quick story about Dylan and Russia?"

I mean, there's nothing to say, is there? All I needed was a newsworthy event to tie the slim pickings together.

Then Dylan did me a favor. On Oct. 12 he released a Yuletide CD called "Christmas from the Heart." There it was, the Event. So I cooked up a question to get things moving, something along the lines of, "What do Russia, Bob Dylan and Christmas have in common?" One of the projected answers was this: "Dylan's ancestors immigrated to the United States from Russia around 1906 and his Christmas album features a cover drawing of a sleigh and driver that looks like something off an old Russian postcard."

In my little blog entry I was going to provide some details about Dylan's forebears, touch on a trip he made to Moscow in 1985 and include a few words about his first, full-fledged Russian performance in St. Petersburg on June 3, 2008. Then I got side tracked. Suffice it to say that an Internet check for the words "Bob Dylan Russia" produced more than a million links.

No, I did not follow them all, but I did hunt long enough to find some cool Russian sites I knew nothing about.

Bob-Dylan.ru is a curious side trip. It contains descriptive Russian-language listings for several albums, songs and films associated with the singer. With no explanation, it also includes short texts about Warren Zevon ("Excitable Boy") and Neil Young ("Greendale"). I guess good taste in music requires no explanation.

A place called Agitclub has the lyrics to "Maggie's Farm," "Political World," "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and many other songs in Russian translation. But that is only the beginning. It also contains Russian translations of portions of Dylan's memoirs "Chronicles," as well as sections of his often bizarre novel "Tarantula," which was written in the mid-1960s, published in the United States in 1971 and translated into Russian by Maxim Nemtsov that same year. Click on the "Dylan Surprise" feature at the bottom of any page and you find a nice collection of concert posters spanning the years 1961 to 2008.

This site's most intriguing section is one lurking near the bottom of the right-hand column called "Bob Dylan in Moscow and Other Important and New Information." Here we find a brief description of an appearance Dylan made at a Moscow stadium in 1985. Even more useful are the links to other sites providing additional details about this mystery-laden trip.

Andrei Gorokhov, a Russian musician, spent time with Andrei Voznesensky, the famous Soviet poet who invited Dylan to Moscow in 1985. In a blog entry Gorokhov tells of visiting Voznesensky's dacha in Peredelkino, outside of Moscow. There the Russian poet showed the Russian musician the chair in which the American songwriter once sat and, this is a quote, "wept." Gorokhov wanted to take the chair home as a souvenir, but Voznesensky refused to give it up. He said he wanted to donate it to an unspecified rock 'n' roll museum.

But let's back that up a minute. Bob Dylan weeping?

According to Voznesensky, the reason was the failure of Dylan's brief stadium performance. Accompanied by his friend and prominent American poet Allen Ginsburg, Dylan was to participate in a poetry concert one day prior to the opening of the 12th World Festival of Youth and Students. Here is what happened, at least in the words of Voznesensky as recorded by Gorokhov.

"You know, [Dylan] flopped here. I invited him and what happened to him was very awkward. It was 1985, and a big evening featuring international poets was to take place in a stadium one day before the opening of the World Festival of Youth and Students. The bad idea for this date belonged to [poet Yevgeny] Yevtushenko. It was a bad idea because no normal spectators had any chance of seeing Dylan or anyone else that evening. Everybody was afraid of provocations — there was no advertising of who was on the bill, the stadium was blocked

off, and busloads of 'trusted' spectators were brought in. I went out and saw that the hall was half full. This would have been a first — if they had hung out posters saying 'Dylan, Yevtushenko, Voznesensky,' etc, that place would have been packed. But Dylan went out there and sang 'Blowin' in the Wind,' and the audience at least got into that a little. But then he got angry and offended and began singing new songs — and it was a total flop. Nobody knew English and they didn't have the vaguest notion who Dylan was. Afterwards we went to my dacha and he wept there — he thought that all Russian audiences were like that. Later, he was sent to Tbilisi where he gave a closed concert at the Writers House. At that time he was already feeling hounded — afraid somebody would shoot him (after Lennon, they all were afraid of that). Anyway, the local youths [in Tbilisi] got hold of his car and lifted it up. He was frightened, crawled into a corner and asked them not to do that. The sad thing about it was that he wanted to go from Moscow to Odessa, which is where his grandmother was from. But he wasn't given permission. As I understand it, he did get to Odessa from Tbilisi."

There is enough fiction and misinformation in Voznesensky's account to sink the whole story, were it not known that, in fact, Dylan did perform three songs in Moscow on July 25, 1985. According to a respected and trustworthy site compiled by Olof Bjorner, Dylan played "Blowin' in the Wind," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'." All of these compositions were written between 1962 and 1963, and thus were not "new" when Voznesensky heard them. As for Dylan being "sent" to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi where youths picked his car up as he cowered in the "corner" and "asked them not to do that" — well, that sounds like someone's not-so-poetic imagination running wild. I am particularly amused by Voznesensky's blaming of fellow poet Yevtushenko for the Dylan "flop," when it was Voznesensky who invited him to Russia in the first place. Bjorner, incidentally, offers no information about the supposed concert in Tbilisi.

Actually, a photo of Dylan and Voznesensky from that trip suggests other reasons as to why the songwriter may have been weeping — not tears of rage, but tears of sheer boredom. Voznesensky, holding a full plate of food, obviously is so busy jabbering at his famous American guest he has no time to eat. Dylan, who clearly finished his food long ago and presumably can't get a word in edgewise, looks like something of a trapped rabbit.

One can't help but wonder if Dylan at this moment is thinking of his own song "All Along the Watchtower":

"There must be some way out of here, said the joker to the thief.

"There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief..."

To see a photo that may have been taken at the Moscow performance, go here.

If that is not enough of a Russian connection for you, there are numerous other, and far more reliable, places to go. Maxim Nemtsov, who also translated the official Russian version of "Chronicles," has written much of interest about Dylan and some of it can be found on booknik.ru, a site devoted to writing on Jewish themes.

One of the biggest web sites following Dylan is called Expecting Rain. In the labyrinth of its thousands of discussion threads, one can scare up all kinds of topics, including "Dylan and Chagall," "Dylan in Russia," "An Entire Album Based on Checkov [sic] Short Stories"

and many more. There are references to Bulat Okudzhava being the Soviet Bob Dylan; Boris Grebenshchikov being influenced by Dylan; and one fan playing in a Dylan imitation contest and sounding like "Bob Dylan trying to sound like Vladimir Vysotsky."

And that is only the beginning.

My colleague Sergei Chernov, writing in The St. Petersburg Times, provided tantalizing information about a 1988 Moscow concert that was cancelled because only four tickets were sold. The date of this supposed concert is suspect, however, since Dylan toured only in North America throughout 1988. It is more likely that a concert was planned in summer 1989. Dylan did perform in Helsinki, Finland, on May 30 that year and did not perform again until June 3 in Dublin, Ireland. It sounds like a Moscow date for May 31 or June 1, 1989, would have made logical sense.

Dylan's first, full-fledged Russian appearance in St. Petersburg was a mixed affair. I attended and I would guess that there were about 4,000 spectators in the 11,500 seat hall. But it was a boisterous group and Dylan put on a scintillating show. You can read more about that here.

The Dylan Covers Data Base informs us that eight Russian bands, including Grebenshchikov and Gorokhov's ADO, have covered ten Dylan songs in Russian.

For the record, Dylan's grandparents did emigrate from the Russian Empire. All were part of the great Jewish escape following the brutal pogroms that swept across western Russia in 1905. Dylan's paternal grandparents Zigman and Anna Zimmerman came from Odessa. His maternal grandparents Benjamin Solemovitz and Florence Edelstein were from Kovno, Lithuania — today known as Kaunas.

Not to be outdone, however, one site suggests rather unexpectedly that some of Dylan's ancestors may have come from Kyrgyzstan. I'm still tracking that bit of information.

Reaching out on the fringes now, one Russian social networking site has a Bob Dylan circle consisting of eight members. Three, incidentally, are unemployed and looking for work. I don't know if that says anything about Dylan fans or not.

As for Dylan's "Christmas from the Heart," I'll leave it at this: The CD's worldwide proceeds — including in Russia — go entirely to children's charities. You gotta love that.

For more Russia-related Dylan images, browse through the photo gallery above.

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