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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Blast to Play Free Gig To Celebrate 15 Years

By Nosheen Shakil

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Tavkhelidze, center, the lead singer, founded the group Blast in 1996.

Once dubbed "the godfathers of Russian rock 'n' roll" by British music weekly NME, Blast celebrates their 15th anniversary on Thursday with a concert — free for all — at Music Town and the release of their latest album.

Lead singer Nash Tavkhelidze, invariably dressed in jeans and Converse sneakers, is a familiar face to anyone who goes to local live venues such as Krizis Zhanra.

For an interview, he and the rest of the five-piece group — a random mix of leather jackets, tattoos and hats — sit backstage in a smoky room in club 16 Tons. Half of them munch on cheeseburgers, and a beautiful blonde sits beside them as if to cross the T's on their rock 'n' roll cachet.

"Hi, Mom, I'm in the newspaper," quips drummer Vlado Kostov.

How did a Moscow group composed of a Georgian, two Bulgarians and a pair of Russians singing in English conquer the Moscow rock 'n' roll scene, where they play between 15 and 25 gigs a month?

"We always play and will play till the end, we are simply not interested in anything else," Tavkhelidze says. "We can't do anything else, we're useless." At these words, the group bursts into laughter.

Tavkhelidze formed Blast in 1996 after returning to Moscow from the United States, where he had spent four years with his then-group Salamandra after he was spotted by a promoter in a local club.

Blast is known for playing original songs as well as covers and has had a number of labels stuck on them, some of which they are less than keen on.

"F--- Britpop, our style is unique. ... We play rock 'n' roll," Tavkhelidze says, and the band members reel off a list of influences: The Beatles, The Doors, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, The Who and The Stone Roses.

"My inspiration comes from everyday life, from emotions, nourished by vodka and fags," Tavkhelidze adds.

Before a gig the group gets together for an informal set list, "which everybody immediately forgets."

Looking back over the last 15 years, Blast has had a lot of good memories, including an illegal rooftop gig in Chelsea, London, to which more than 1,000 people turned up — including the police — as well as a frenzied audience in St. Petersburg at a Maxidrom festival.

They have toured all over the world and are a regular choice as support for the biggest names when they come to Russia.

"Take Deep Purple: We met the sound engineer by accident. He heard us playing and really liked what we're doing," Tavkhelidze says. "He had Deep Purple's management listen to our songs, and they totally loved it. ... They then insisted on having us as their support group."

The group has also supported Blur and Franz Ferdinand. Why them? "Because we are great, of course!" Tavkhelidze jokes.

"Our music has become more melodic, more professional," he says, adding deadpan: "We have become wiser." Cue giggles from the rest of the band.

"Our biggest mistake was to play covers. We lost a lot of time between 2001 and 2005, but the money was nice and we were covering excellently."

Despite their success, the group still has a jaundiced view of the music business.

"The music scene in Moscow, and in Russia as a whole, is terrible. There are many talented groups, but they're not allowed on radio or television," he says. "There's an incredible disparity between what is produced on television and what the public likes.

“In Europe, groups start in their garages, play in clubs and when they get popular will eventually find their way to radio and television. Radio and television should be a reflection of the public’s taste. Here it is the opposite. ... The audience has to listen to what is on offer. When doing the interview with [television channel] Nostalgia, we received so many reactions from all over the country: ‘Guys, you are brilliant. Why have we never heard of you?’”

Nevertheless, they still have ambition, saying they would like to play in Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden.

“We absolutely believe that our music will get us somewhere,” Tavkhelidze says.

Blast plays on Thursday at 9 p.m. at club Music Town, 8/2 Ulitsa Sadovaya-Chernogryazskaya. Metro Kurskaya. Tel. 937-5419, www.musictownclub.ru.

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