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In the Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, Forbes magazine published its list of the highest-earning Russian stars in entertainment and sports, and the top place went to chanson singer-songwriter Stas Mikhailov — who was not even in last year's rating.

Mikhailov earned $20 million last year, and his name was entered an amazing 14.4 million times on the Yandex search engine, Forbes wrote of the rating, which takes into account both earnings and perceived popularity.

He came ahead of tennis player Maria Sharapova in second place, and in third place Alla Pugachyova, queen of Russian pop.

Mikhailov, a slightly portly man with a cross hanging prominently on his chest above an unbuttoned shirt, tends to horrify music critics.

"Mikhailov just has nothing. All his songs are done with a flat restaurant-singer sound, all the tunes are similar, and all the lyrics have schoolboy errors of speech," hipster magazine Afisha wrote in April, wrinkling its nose.

Originality may not be his strong point. Three of his hits are called "You," "Without You"' and "Everything for You." It's easy to scoff, but then again, one of his songs has been watched more than 12 million times on YouTube.

Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote that his rates for playing at a private party start at $100,000 — high even by Russian standards — and he lives in a Swiss chalet-style mansion on Rublyovskoye Shosse.

His genre, chanson, is big on songs about lives that went wrong, bad boys who want to go straight and the love of a good woman. It has little to do with French torch songs, despite the name. But Mikhailov is different from many chanson singers in that he does not sing about jail experiences and seems to be popular mainly among women.

"Mikhailov's audience is women of a certain age," Forbes wrote. "Songs about broken hearts, burning candles and the pain of infidelity gather full houses around the whole country."

What makes Mikhailov stand out is that he does not belong to the old guard of pop stars. Until recently, he was rarely shown on television or mentioned in the press, and — like it or not — his popularity must be real.

Channel One is going to show one of his concerts on Aug. 14, prompting ecstatic comments on the channel's web site. "I'm sick of those pop singers who all look the same. Stas Mikhailov is a personality. He has something to say," wrote Inna from Moscow.

"Stanislav Vladimirovich's songs are understandable to anyone. They bring light and joy to our life," wrote Nelya from Samara.

I guess some of the snobbery comes from the fact that he comes from provincial Sochi and dropped out of music college in Tambov, according to Forbes. But lately he has received official recognition, being awarded the Honored Artist of Russia title last year by President Dmitry Medvedev. It's an absurdity, but still the stamp of having made it in show business.

In an interview he gave to the 7 Dnei mass market television listings magazine, there are tear-jerking stories about how he gave up drinking after praying to an icon and how he took his sick baby son to a church where he was miraculously cured. Although somewhat incongruously, it also mentions that he is divorced and has had two children out of wedlock.

His partner Inna is the former wife of footballer Andrei Kanchelskis. They met in a restaurant after she went to a concert. "At that time Inna had divorced her husband and was a very wealthy woman, while Stas lived in a rented flat on the edge of the city," 7 Dnei writes.

Komsomolskaya Pravda speculated whether she contributed to Mikhailov's wealth. "People say he managed to become a millionaire with the help of his common-law wife, who invested the large sums she received from her divorce in promoting him," it wrote.

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