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Markscheider Credo 'Just Having a Laugh'

By Sergei Chernov

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The veteran St. Petersburg group has played a wide mix of music styles from funk to ska to reggae and salsa.

ST. PETERSBURG — Markscheider Kunst has managed to keep its sense of humor and have fun at its concerts, while its peers have grown deadly serious, according to the veteran St. Petersburg band's singer and guitarist Sergei "Yefr" Yefremenko.

"In the beginning, Leningrad had a great sense of humor, but now it's somehow gone," he said, sipping a Heineken in a downtown cafe in St. Petersburg.

"Or take my favorite band Auktsion – everything has become so serious that I don't understand — are we performing Stravinsky or playing on Stradivarius instruments? I can't understand where this seriousness comes from."

Markscheider Kunst makes regular trips to Moscow and will play his next show at Gogol

on Jan. 20. There will be no seriousness on show

"I'm just having a laugh: Look at me — it's all a circus. If you don't like it, we won't see you tomorrow, but if you like it, come again. But this 'profound inner meaning' that [Russian rock music station] Nashe Radio is full of makes me laugh. Because there's no meaning in it, there's no music in it, there's no humor in it — so what are we doing, guys?"

Yefremenko acknowledges DDT frontman Yury Shevchuk's independent civic stance and dissident politics, and Yefremenko said he could not listen to more than half of the opening song on the band's most recent album.

"I became so depressed that I had to watch a couple of Woody Allen films to recover," he said.

However, Yefremenko singles out Akvarium's Boris Grebenshchikov from other Russian veteran rock musicians.

"The only one who brings me joy in this sense is our dear Boris Borisovich, who keeps performing his songs even if some people laugh at them," he said.

"But at least these are songs. With my late friend Pavel Litvinov, we once defined a song as something you can either hum at home while cooking scrambled eggs or perform in concert with an orchestra."

As far as newer acts are concerned, he cites Chyo Morale — a band that fuses gypsy songs, Soviet pop and Balkan folk — both for its musicianship and sense of humor.

"Western musicians tend to do what they do best and stay in their niche, but [Russian musicians] have been reinventing the wheel since the era of Russian rock [in the late 1980s]," Yefremenko says.

"Everything has already been invented and you don't need to hide from that. If you're a rock band, play rock in its accepted state. You don't need to say things like 'rock is when everything is bad' or 'rock is protest.'

"Rock 'n' roll was invented by boys in order to get girls to like them. Its main message is that boys want to be liked by girls, while girls want to dance. When it works, it's a good concert: When girls dance and like the boys who are standing on stage."

Yefremenko did not attend the December protests that brought together thousands in St. Petersburg and tens of thousands in Moscow, but he says he supported them.

"I sent my angel to them," he said.

"I am with these people. I don't like "rubbing one out in an outhouse" [a reference to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's infamous quote] or thinking that the Jews are to blame for everything. I am strictly against that. I don't think anybody is to blame.

Markscheider Kunst's own highly danceable music blend includes ska, funk, reggae, Brazilian rhythms and salsa, although it started out as a rhythm and blues trio in 1992.

"We like Latin music, so we play it," Yefremenko said.

"We had a period when we were playing African music with [African singer] Selengi Makangila. We played it and did so well, natives of this culture used to tell us. We're not ashamed of that. Now we like Latin music, and we may like something else later. There's no need to worry, since the Mongol invasion anything can be absorbed in Russia."

Since 2000, Yefremenko has also been the frontman of Tres Muchachos y Companieros, Markscheider Kunst's spin-off band that performs an early-to-mid-20th-century Cuban repertoire. With Tres Muchachos y Companieros he plays the tres, a three-stringed Cuban guitar.

Markscheider Kunst play Jan. 20 at Gogol. 11 Stoleshnikov Pereulok. Metro. Teatralnaya. Tel. 514-0944

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