The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bulat Okudzhava and the Arbat

By John Freedman

May 01, 2012



John Freedman

You flow like a river with your strange name
And your asphalt is like transparent river water.
Oh, Arbat, my Arbat, you are my calling,
You are my joy and my sorrow.

The people walking you are not exalted,
Their heels click, they hurry on their way.
Oh, Arbat, my Arbat, you are my religion
Your roadway lies beneath me.

I will never be cured of loving you,
Even as I love forty thousand other roads.
Oh, Arbat, my Arbat, you are my homeland,
No one could ever reach the end of you.

Bulat Okudzhava wrote that in 1959. It is one of his most famous songs and it is called, "Song about the Arbat."

It came to mind today because of a press release I received from the Contemporary Play School. Every year this theater conducts a weeklong commemoration of Okudzhava's life with concerts and events held on their indoor stage and on the square in front of the theater on Neglinnaya Ulitsa. These events, which have grown in popularity over the years, roughly coincide with the great poet, novelist and singer's birthday on May 9. This year the festival begins on the 9th and runs through May 17.

I think of Okudzhava often. I wrote about some of the reasons for that in this space three years ago. But my thoughts took on a special intensity when I happened to be walking down the Arbat a few weeks ago on my way to a show at the Vakhtangov Theater. I passed by the statue of the writer which now stands at the intersection of the Arbat and Plotnikov Pereulok and I did a little internal bow of reverence that I do every time I pass it.

That song of his — "Arbat, my Arbat, you are my homeland" — popped into my head. Then I looked around me and realized what a horrible disconnect was occurring between the words in my mind and the images my eyes were taking in.

Listen up, Moscow city planners: the Arbat, Bulat Okudzhava's favorite street in all the world, has become an eyesore. It is crass, ugly and phony. It makes my skin crawl to walk it, the very same place of which Okudzhava wrote that "No one could ever reach the end of you." That's how endless its unexalted beauty once was. Now it is filled with cheap souvenir shops and garish cafes. It is a dead-end trap for unsuspecting pedestrians. The once honorably drab old buildings that line it have been turned into Barbie-doll versions of Russian architecture — stiff, fake, over-colored and falling apart as soon as they are renovated. Many of the original buildings have been torn down and long forgotten.

Look at the first picture above, taken from the cover of an Okudzhava songbook printed by Ardis Publishers. The Arbat was still a real street when this photo was taken, probably in the 1970s. It had character, it had mystery, it had style.

I once had the honor of walking on the real Arbat. It was 1979. I remember being astonished by how narrow it was. Unlike the scene in the photo above, it was packed with cars twisting and turning and overtaking one another in all directions. The sidewalks were narrow and people were struggling to navigate around each other to keep moving forward.

I do not know what I was doing there. I was just a dumb young man walking down a road. Fortunately, nature intervened. A cloud burst hit and I didn't have an umbrella. The only thing to be done was to duck into an archway and wait out the downpour with three or four other umbrellaless souls. We didn't talk, we were all preoccupied with the sound and the sight of a wall of water moving slowly past us. The gutters were instantly inundated as if by the "river water" that Okudzhava sings about, although this was grimy and dirty — not the transparent stuff of the song. Nothing exalted here.

For the record, I was on the north side of the street, probably somewhere off of Okudzhava's right shoulder in the book cover portrait.

Life changed in the few minutes I spent under the cover of that archway. The bustle I had been jostling to avoid came to a halt. People disappeared, the sidewalks emptied, and cars now seemed to disappear into an orderly hush. The rain beat back their harsh sounds and, apparently, forced drivers to let up on the gas and remain in their lanes. Some may have even pulled over to wait out the rain. It was that violent of a storm.

The rain made me stop and look and listen. What I saw was a street's persona emerge.

The place felt alive. The road twists at times like a snake, like a living entity. The columns and the windows of the buildings facing me from across the street reminded me of wrinkles and eyes in a weathered, fascinating face. There is nothing mystical in this. It was simply a confirmation that, yes, this place has personality. The old Arbat made no effort to please you whatsoever. It was, as I have said, a bit drab and rather rundown. Buildings then weren't pink, yellow and green. They were honorably gray. Their walls were chipped and cracked. But when you stopped to look at them, they looked back. I saw there in that archway why Okudzhava called this small street his "calling." I could feel it calling to me, too. Not shouting out, but calling lazily and indifferently enough that I could hear it when I put my mind to it.

None of that remains. Although as I walked toward the Vakhtangov Theater a few weeks ago I was suddenly called back to the Okudzhava statue. What made me return was a series of horrible storefronts in garish red and orange, one with a broken window, another with cheap tourist-trap garb blowing in the wind. I felt compelled to retrace my steps and stand by Okudzhava for just a moment to get that out of my system. These things hurt and you must treat them if you're not to give into the sickness of disgust.

My plan was to take a photo of the Okudzhava statue. To capture just a little bit of the man's soul that was with me there right then. In my mind's eye it was to be a photo of Okudzhava's wise and solemn likeness looking out over the wasteland that has replaced the street he once loved. But people kept stopping to take their pictures in front of the statue. One group moved on and before I could snap a shot, another moved in. They left and were immediately replaced by two young women who were having so much fun taking each other's picture that I thought they would never leave.

That pleased me. There was life here by this monument honoring the memory of Okudzhava. There may not be any left anywhere else on that street, but here, in this small bit of land cut away at the end of Plotnikov Pereulok, it still could be found. Somewhat soothed, I took my pictures and headed off down what is left of the Arbat.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/01/bulat-okudzhava-and-the-arbat-a34322