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BalconyTV Set to Make Its Debut in St. Petersburg

By Sergei Chernov

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Local band Markscheider Kunst performing high above the rooftops at BalconyTV's St. Petersburg launch. **Sergey Chernov**

ST. PETERSBURG — St. Petersburg will now have its own BalconyTV, the international daily online viral music show that features bands, musicians and other variety acts on balconies around the world.

The St. Petersburg page is already present on the BalconyTV website, which boasts more than 20 million video views, and will start being updated with material Friday.

BalconyTV St. Petersburg was founded by musician Seva Gakkel, formerly cellist in the seminal rock band Akvarium and the pioneering TaMtAm Club founder. The long balcony where the show will be filmed runs around an apartment on the seventh floor of a building on the Petrograd Side, and was provided by ballerina and film actress Sofya Skya. Along with Gakkel, Skya will introduce the opening video when it appears on the BalconyTV website

Friday.

During the launch party Sunday, material from which will be used to compile the opening video, Markscheider Kunst — one of the city's best-loved bands — performed its Latin-tinged song "Babushka."

The eight-member band — Gakkel's friends from the TaMtAm era in the 1990s — performed, complete with percussion and brass section, colored by the evening sun on a classic white night, and sounded crisp and fresh in the open air high above old rooftops.

Gakkel said he came across BalconyTV by chance while surfing the Web three or four years ago.

"I just followed a link, then another link. ... I don't do that too often, but I watch live performances by bands that I don't know in different situations," he said.

"Then all of a sudden I found myself on [the] BalconyTV [website] watching the flash mob they did to the song 'Always Someone Watching' by a band called Alan Alda. It was on a balcony, lower than this one, maybe on the third floor, and there were couples dancing to the song. I liked the band's music and tracked it down, and started visiting the site once in a while.

"At that time there were two balconies, in Dublin and Hamburg. Then I saw that a third balcony had emerged in Camden, London, and I began to get intrigued by the idea."

By that time, BalconyTV existed in about 30 cities around the world.

"Balconies emerged in almost every European capital, on both coasts of the United States, in Mexico, India and Thailand — and in [the Russian city of] Kostroma," Gakkel said.

"It fired my ambition; I'd been observing it for so long, and I should have been the first [in Russia], according to the logic of things I have done over the years. And suddenly I saw that I had missed the boat. I got in touch with the guy in Kostroma and he told me, 'I am just about to come to St. Petersburg, I think maybe we should launch BalconyTV there.' I thought 'How is that possible? The guys from Kostroma will come and start doing it here?'

"I got motivated and started looking for balconies, and almost immediately I met Sofya — who's the daughter of my good friend Alexandra Arzhakovskaya from many, many years ago — by pure chance in Moscow and told her this story. She said, 'I have an apartment that's being renovated and I don't know when work will finish.' I came here, saw it and thought 'My God, I haven't seen this type of balcony in this project; they were either tiny balconies or large open terraces, where they set up drums, a back line and so on."

The advantage of BalconyTV St. Petersburg is that its location is outside the club scene.

"This is a territory that is neutral, abstract, independent from the trend that exists in the city at the moment," Gakkel said.

According to Gakkel, the benefit of unplugged performances lies in the fact that musicians who are perfectionist about the sound quality during concerts agree to casual performances on the balcony without demanding exhausting sound checks.

"[The attitude is] 'It sounds OK, let's go!' as was demonstrated by Markscheider Kunst today," Gakkel said.

"It's interesting for me. First of all, they're my old friends, it's nice for me that we're launching this project with a performance by this band in particular, because it's dear to me from some of my old adventures."

Gakkel said he would consider inviting Markscheider Kunst for a full-fledged performance, beyond the context of the launch party.

"There are not so many things like that on the Internet, and they could be united in some niche," he said.

"BalconyTV lets people visit the portal just to see what's happened there, say, in the past month — either young bands and new names or bands you already know and are interested in. For instance, I came across The Buzzcocks performing on the tiny balcony in Dublin and Nouvelle Vague performing as a duo on the balcony in London."

BalconyTV was founded in Dublin in June 2006 by filmmaker Stephen O'Regan and musicians Tom Millett and Pauline Freeman. O'Reagan and Millett shared an apartment and started hosting the show from their balcony there.

BalconyTV St. Petersburg will be launched at www.balconytv.com on Friday, June 1.

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