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Russian Culture Rocks Patti Smith

By John Freedman

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Patti Smith recently released a new record — album, CD, collection-of-songs-for-download, call it what you will. She called it "Banga," and as any net search will tell you, the mysterious title was drawn from a very minor figure in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, "The Master and Margarita." Banga in Bulgakov's creation is Pontius Pilate's dog, a creature so loyal he is willing to wait for his master virtually forever.

But the pull of Russian culture on Smith and her latest music goes beyond this one enigmatic song. According to the singer's self-penned liner notes accompanying the CD, she wrote two other songs under the influence, so to speak: "April Fool," which was inspired by the writings of Nikolai Gogol, and "Tarkovsky (The Second Stop is Jupiter)," inspired by the great filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky.

"April Fool" is a jaunty love song that employs several images from Gogol's works and life.

"We'll race through alleyways in tattered coats" is a fairly clear reference to Gogol's short story "The Overcoat," while "we'll burn all of our poems" begs to be considered a nod

to the fact that Gogol famously burned the second volume of his great novel "Dead Souls." That work, one of Russia's funniest and darkest, is conjured in the lines, "We'll tramp through the mire when our souls feel dead. With laughter we'll inspire them back to life again."

An indicator that Smith went deeper than most into Gogol is a line that declares, "We'll pray to all our saints, icons of mystery." Gogol, in fact, became increasingly interested in religion and the lives of the saints in the latter years of his life, although this led him to a hardboiled conservatism that probably would not suit Smith's more liberal, not to say radical, views.

"Tarkovsky" is a beautiful case of kindred spirits coming together.

Smith, a poet and improviser, has often been described as a shamanistic performer, something she confirmed for Russian audiences at Moscow's B2 club in 2005 and again at B1Maximum in 2008. Tarkovsky, famous for taking days to set up single camera shots, was anything but a spontaneous creator, but there was definitely something of the shaman in him. All his films presented dream states that blurred the usual boundaries of time and space. Ingmar Bergman put it this way: "Tarkovsky is for me the greatest, the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream."

Smith's song named after Tarkovsky is very much a collection of dream images. In her liner notes she reveals that the song is based on Tarkovsky's first feature, "Ivan's Childhood," and, indeed, the lines, "Black moon shines on a lake, white as a hand in the dark," could well be inspired by some of that film's early scenes.

Still, a close listen indicates that Smith watched other Tarkovsky films as well.

Surely her lyric, "The telegraph poles are crosses on the line, rusted pins, not enough saviors to hang," is drawn from the desolate scene in "Stalker," where the three travelers to the Zone come to a kind of graveyard of machinery, railroad ties and telephone poles deep in the countryside.

Perhaps her image of a woman waiting "beneath the triangle formed by Mercury and the Evening Star, the fifth planet with its blistering sore" is a reference to the location of spaceship Solaris in the film of that name, where a man unexpectedly encounters his dead wife.

One of the opening images of the song — "Come along, sweet lad, fog rises from the ground" — sounds like a reference to "Ivan's Childhood," where a 12-year-old boy creeps through fog and water-laden ground in the middle of World War II. But it could easily be an allusion to many other Tarkovsky films, all of which are shrouded in fogs, mists and vapors.

A line such as "the sea is a morgue," repeated twice by Smith for emphasis, sends us inconclusively to several films. Does she mean the pond in "Nostalghia" that a Russian writer crosses before dying? Is it one of those swirling water holes shown in "Solaris" to evoke a solar system deep in space? Or might it be the underground river that the stalker, professor and writer must ford in "Stalker"?

As for "Banga," Smith is hardly the first rocker to be inspired by Bulgakov's novel about a writer encountering Christ and the Devil.

Dating back to December 1968, one year to the month after a new translation of "The Master and Margarita" was published in English, the Rolling Stones unveiled their album "Beggar's Banquet," featuring one of their greatest songs, "Sympathy for the Devil." This was no case of merely putting literature to lyrics, but several of the song's images — including the classic opening line, "Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste" — sound quite like they took their origin in Bulgakov's work.

Thirty years after the Stones, Pearl Jam in 1998 offered another musical homage to "The Master and Margarita" in the song "Pilate." Interestingly, Banga appears here, too, though not by name.

That "Banga" is no ordinary hymn to cute pets is clear from the opening words of the song. Here Smith references another Bulgakovian dog without naming him: Sharik from the novella "Heart of a Dog." She name-checks the full title to kick off her narrative, which explores the dark side of loyalty. "You can lick it twice, but it won't lick you," she sneers, later adding, "Loyal he lives and we don't know why."

The more Smith throws herself into this angry, chanted song, the more one realizes it is another of the singer-songwriter's trademark relentless, fury-fueled musical rants — in this case, against the notion of canine loyalty, or "salivating salvation," as she calls it. Banga, after all, shows allegiance to the Roman judge who put Jesus to death, while Sharik, following an experimental medical operation, was transformed into a mean-spirited and dangerous human.

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