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Soviet-Born Star Regina Spektor Returns to Moscow

By Sergei Chernov

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Spektor left the Soviet Union with her parents in 1989 at the age of 9.

ST. PETERSBURG — Regina Spektor, the Moscow-born, New York-based singer songwriter, has returned to Russia for the first time since she emigrated to perform in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

"I'm really, really happy to be coming, I'm very excited," the 32-year-old Spektor said of her upcoming Russian concerts in a recent phone interview from New York.

Now on tour in support of her sixth album, "What We Saw from the Cheap Seats," Spektor sounded unsure about her fame in her country of birth.

"I don't know for sure if there are people who know about me or not," she said.

"It seems some people know of me. But I don't know if it's true, I have no idea, because I know that they don't play me on the radio or show me on television."

In anticipation of her visit to Russia, Spektor released a Russian-language version of "Don't Leave Me (Ne Me Quitte Pas)," her second single from the new album, which she introduced on her Facebook page as a gift to her fans in Russia, signing the message "Reginka" — the Russian diminutive version of her first name.

Born in Moscow in 1980 into a musical Russian Jewish family, Spektor learned to play classical piano before she left the Soviet Union with her family in 1989 during perestroika.

"I have a lot of memories: I was almost ten, so I remember very many things," Spektor said.

"I loved my life there, I had a very good childhood. I've always been very close to Russian culture and remain close. My parents brought a large number of Russian books and records with them, communicated in Russian at home, and Russian humor, food and everything remained a large part of my life. So it stayed with me. You could say my childhood was more connected to being in Russia with my parents than to American food, for example.

"Of course it was a difficult change for me, but if you have good parents and you're with them, you're fine everywhere and everything is interesting. They made everything interesting for me. ... They made everything really good for me. I've always felt a lot of love and attention, and that's the most important thing for a child. Everything else is secondary."

Spektor said her exposure to Soviet ideology was minimal as she was so young when she emigrated. When Soviet collectivism was mentioned during the interview, she asked what it was.

"We planted a vegetable garden when I was in kindergarten," the singer said.

"I didn't even finish second grade [in Russia], that's why I don't remember ... I do remember that we learned poems about Uncle Lenin and stuff like that, but in my family we paid more attention to poets, classical music, Pushkin and culture than Komsomol [Young Communist Union], the party or things like that."

On the cover of "Soviet Kitsch" — which featured classic Spektor songs such as "Ode to Divorce," "Us" and "Ghost of Corporate Future" — she was pictured in a Soviet naval cap drinking from a bottle against a backdrop of Russian nesting dolls.

"I came up with this title because it's true that when you're growing up, especially when you're a teenager in New York, you always feel that you're a little different, especially if you're an immigrant," she said.

"It's true for any immigrant; you feel the same whether you're from Mexico, Puerto Rico or Spain. But what was especially interesting with being from Russia was that we had had the Cold War between us and America. And just as there was propaganda in the Soviet Union, there was a lot of propaganda on the other side as well. And people were really scared of Russia, and there were all kinds of stereotypes. And when I came into this culture, I didn't know where all that came from. But it came from exactly where it came from [in the Soviet Union] — from propaganda."

Spektor said that with the cover and the album title, she wanted to confront those stereotypes.

“When I grew up and people found out that I was from Russia, they would immediately start saying certain things,” she said.

“Not everybody, but the average, not very educated person would start saying something about vodka and Communism and things like that. And I got so tired of it when I was growing up, because it always seemed a little bit funny and a little bit sad.”

“On the whole, I feel that a large part of my personality stems from the fact that I am from Russia, that I am an immigrant, that I understand the language and can write literature in the original as well as the fact that I grew up listening to [Russian] singer-songwriters. Of course, that’s a huge part of me. And it has had a great influence on me, just as my music is influenced by the fact that I grew up in New York, in the Bronx, just as my music is influenced by the fact that I studied classical piano, and didn’t just teach myself to play. When you play Chopin, Mozart and Bach that much, the music enters you and simply becomes part of you.

“And of course the fact that I am Jewish has also entered my music in a big way. I am sort of a mixture, a mongrel; I took a little from everywhere, mixed it up and am trying to express myself somehow.”

Regina Spektor will perform Sunday. 7 p.m. Crocus City Hall. 65-66 Kilometers Moscow Ring Road. Metro. Myakinino. Tel. (495) 550-0055. www.crocus-hall.ru

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