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Up-and-Comers, Old Favorites Save Afisha Picnic

By Alec Luhn

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Visitors to the Afisha picnic will have to get up early to catch The Retuses, who play at 12:40 p.m. on Saturday.

Afisha Picnic, the annual Moscow summer music festival that will be held in Kolomenskoye Park Saturday, came under a cloud in May when headliner Bjork canceled her performance because of problems with her vocal cords. The eccentric Icelandic songstress also canceled other festival gigs, although she played Denmark's Roskilde Festival on July 8, where she wowed the crowd with her dress made of giant black worms.

Meanwhile, Afisha Picnic organizers quickly replaced Bjork with tireless English electronic-pop godfathers Pet Shop Boys, securing a festival closer with wider appeal, if slightly less cachet. Other big international acts this year include Franz Ferdinand, Lauren Hill and Mos Def, all of them surefire crowd-pleasers. The Russian answer will come from Soviet-rock greats Akvarium, young folksters The Retuses, and NRKTK, who play a high-calorie mix of hip-hop, pop and rock.

Although The Retuses' laconic frontman Mikhail Rodionov was impassive about his band's second appearance at Afisha Picnic — "I would be wide-eyed if it was a solo show at Hyde Park" — he called the event the leading Russian music festival.

"Afisha Picnic is the best of the festivals that I've been to," Rodionov said. "It's the best organized for both musicians and listeners. It's planned for maximum comfort."

The festival, which has been held in Moscow since 2004, draws tens of thousands of fans for one full day of music. This year's incarnation features three music stages, as well as a multitude of vendors and attractions like video games, ping-pong and a swimming pool. Up-and-comers The Drums and Little Boots are the buzz-bands to watch, while British electronic noise-rock trailblazers F*** Buttons represent the most adventurous lineup choice.

The Retuses' jangly ballads and chaotic yet harmonious waltzes, virtually all of which are built around Rodionov's ukelele lines and dreamy singing (in Russian), will be right at home among the greenery of Kolomenskoye. According to Rodionov, whose sometimes listless voice occasionally ascends to a plaintive quiver almost reminiscent of Nick Drake, the band's main influences are Beirut, fellow indie darlings Arcade Fire and Neutral Milk Hotel, and Russian cabaret singer Alexander Vertinsky.

Although Rodionov's poetic style and lyrics — one of The Retuses' best known songs is the famous Sergei Yesenin poem "Letter to a Woman" set to music — bring to mind the old Russian school of singer-songwriters, the singer denied that he sees himself as part of this tradition.

The Retuses face a challenge at Afisha Picnic: They will be one of the first acts to play, at 12:40 p.m. Rodionov said the band would play a set-list including old hits as well as three new songs, one of which has never been performed live.

For up-and-coming bands like The Drums, Little Boots and The Retuses, a strong performance could boost their popularity on the local scene.

"There was a bit of resonance after Afisha Picnic [last year]," Rodionov said. "Not a lot, but there was some."

Asked if he hoped for a similar boost this year, he replied with just a touch of rock-star ennui: "I don't really care."

Afisha Picnic is on Sat. 12 p.m. to 10 p.m. Kolomenskoye Park. 39 Prospekt Andropova. Metro Kolomenskaya. picnic.afisha.ru

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