

Aleshkovsky's Words of Wisdom Laced With Swears

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The musician and writer, seen here with a female companion, is best remembered for his song about Josef Stalin.

Dissident writer Yuz Aleshkovsky demonstrated an uncanny ability to swear with impressive frequency while chatting to journalists at a book reading last Friday, but no one took it personally.

His use of swear words seems more like an old-fashioned classic of a genre, combined with the rich and colorful phrasing enabled by the Russian language, amazingly left intact after more than 30 years of emigration.

Today, 73-year-old Aleshkovsky, reminiscent of a beat generation figure in his trademark wool cap, came to Russia to present a book project with his longtime friend, rock musician Andrei Makarevich.

The book of Aleshkovsky's short essays, called "The Book of Three of My Muses" and illustrated by Makarevich, was a culmination of a longtime friendship between the two.

"I don't recommend this book to people who go into a stupor from explicit words and who don't have a sense of humor," Makarevich said, adding that taking part in a book project with Aleshkovsky was an "honor" for him.

Aleshkovsky used explicit words to give his opinion on the Pussy Riot performance in Christ the Savior Cathedral and even called their music "tasteless."

"Not only are their songs tasteless, but the authorities and clergy have demonstrated a tasteless attitude toward them as well," Aleshkovsky said.

He did go on to say, however, that it would have been better to give the band members a lighter 15-day sentence and leave them alone.

"I wish that on no one — to go through prison. It is such nonsensical garbage," Aleshkovsky said during an interview in Moscow.

Aleshkovsky knows what he is talking about. He spent nearly four years in a Soviet prison for stealing a car while serving in the Soviet Navy.

Freed under the large-scale amnesty after the death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, Aleshkovsky became most known in his famous satirical song "Comrade Stalin, you are such a big scientist."

The song seemingly addressed Stalin with respect from an ordinary prisoner but in fact was a satirical take on grim Soviet reality. "I understand everything, of course, as an exacerbated class struggle," the lyrics read.

The song gained enormous popularity not only among dissidents but also among ordinary Russians, who believed that it was written by an "unknown poet."

Aleshkovsky said that the song wasn't liked by KGB officials, but it evidently did become popular with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

"I was told that he liked to sing it while in Zavidovo," Aleshkovsky said, referring to Brezhnev's dacha outside Moscow.

Another one of Aleshkovsky's trademark songs, "Cigarette Butt," tells a story about a cigarette butt with traces of lipstick, which brings memories about a girlfriend back home to a prisoner. That song captured the attention of French actor and singer Yves Montand.

After his Russian friends told him about a well-known bard in the Soviet Union, Montand recorded the song, called *Le Megot* in French, in the mid-1970s and even paid a fee to Aleshkovsky.

In 1995, Aleshkovsky also recorded a Russian version of the song in collaboration with Makarevich.

"Yuz is a cult figure in Russian chanson songs," said Maksim Kravchinsky, a music journalist who recently released a book called "History of Russian Chanson," which also featured Aleshkovsky.

Aleshkovsky's life as an underground bard and a writer who penned several satirical samizdat novels about bizarre Soviet life ran in parallel with his prominence as a writer of short stories for children.

His most famous book about school boys "Kish and Two School Bags" was even made into a popular children's film in 1974.

"Children's literature was a way to escape from the censorship. And it is also allowed to be adventurous," Aleshkovsky said.

But while his children's books still find popularity in today's Russia, some say it is his song about Stalin that remains relevant, since even today the Soviet dictator enjoys popularity among a variety of groups.

"It is clear that for many a myth about Stalin is becoming a sort of foundation. Poor people recall the free education that was good and medicine that was terrible, but they forget about the millions of victims," Aleshkovsky said.

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