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New Finnish Book Looks at St. Petersburg Rock

By Sergey Chernov

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Finnish author Tomi Huttunen and musician Alexei Zubarev shown at the Mitki art group's St. Petersburg studio. **Tommi Huttunen**

ST. PETERSBURG — Interest in Russian rock music in Finland is on the rise, says Finnish author Tomi Huttunen, whose book on Russian rock has just been published.

Huttunen, whose book is called "Pietari on Rock," a pun that can be roughly translated as "St. Petersburg Means Rock," came to St. Petersburg earlier this month with a bus full of interested Finns from all around the country, including remote Lapland.

The group walked around places made legendary by the Leningrad rock musicians of the 1980s — including former locations of the Leningrad Rock Club and the bohemian hangout unofficially known as "Saigon" — and attended a concert and a party at the Mitki art group's studio featuring Vladimir Rekshan of the local 1960s/70s rock legends Sankt Peterburg, as well as Alexei Zubarev, guitarist with the art-rock band Sezon Dozhdei in the 1980s and Boris

Grebenshchikov's BG Band and Akvarium in the 1990s.

The trip was arranged to conclude a series of book events that began in March with a concert and discussion with DDT frontman Yury Shevchuk at the University of Helsinki, where Huttunen is a professor of Russian literature.

Huttunen, 42, encountered Russian rock when he first came to Leningrad in 1986. "I was 15 and it was with a high school group in a bus full of drunken Finns," he says.

"We had too many rubles and didn't know what to do with them. We went to Dom Knigi and there, apart from the portraits of Gorbachev, we saw records on sale and one was Akvarium's 'White Album.'"

The freshly released vinyl LP was the first official release by Leningrad's leading rock band fronted by Boris Grebenshchikov, culled from its two underground DIY tapes.

"I played it at home and started to translate the lyrics by ear, using a small tourist dictionary," Huttunen says.

"It turned out many years later that I hadn't understood anything in the lyrics, but the translations turned out to be very interesting."

"I wrote a student essay in Russian, and I wrote about some grass, some hallucinations, something in your palm and this turns into something else ... It was my idea of communication in Russian. My vocabulary was fully based on Grebenshchikov's idiom in the 1980s."

The book also features photos by Dmitry Konradt, who documented most of the historic moments of St. Petersburg rock at its height in the 1980s.

"In the beginning I wanted to explain to the Finnish reader that St. Petersburg rock is exceptionally literature-based," Huttunen said.

"I have a joke [in the book] that 'Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll' translates into Russian as 'Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky.' ... It is a distinctive feature of St. Petersburg rock that it has its roots in 19th-century literature."

Huttunen compares Russian rock's poetry tradition to what was happening in Finland in the 1970s and early 1980s.

"There was a very strong poetry school within rock music, both in Finland and in Russia," he said.

"St. Petersburg Means Rock" includes 30 pages of Russian rock lyrics with parallel Finnish translations done by Huttunen, who sang his translation of Akvarium's early 1980s song "Why Doesn't the Sky Fall Down" ("Pochemu Ne Padayet Nebo") during the event at Mitki's studios last week.

"When an American band comes to Finland, nobody is interested in what they are singing about; they are interested in what they are doing and how they play. With Russian bands,

everybody starts to ask what they're singing about. They feel a text tradition at once and think: 'It sounds like the lyrics are important here.'"

However, translations are not enough to allow for a full understanding of certain aspects of life back then, and further explanation was needed.

"How to explain the song 'Dreams of Something Bigger' ('Sny o Chyom-to Bolshem') and why Akvarium was not allowed to perform on television because it was too daring," Huttunen says.

"It can only be understood in the context of the late 1980s. It's difficult for a Finn to understand what was daring about it."

The book concludes with an explanation of the rock musicians' current political stances, which, Huttunen says, is especially interesting for Finnish readers.

"Why do they ask Grebenshchikov and Shevchuk about what happens in this country? Because nobody asks our (Finnish) rock musicians about political issues. That's what I am trying to explain; why they are addressed about this and what their answers are."

Interest in Russian rock music and culture is experiencing a rebirth in the wake of mass protests and the imprisonment of members of feminist punk group Pussy Riot, he says.

"In spring, we did a presentation for the book in Helsinki, it was just fabulous," Huttunen said. "Everybody came to the university and there was no space in the room, about 100 were left outside. Everybody wanted to see Shevchuk."

"It's interesting for me to see the upsurge of interest in Russian culture now, it was not the case before in Finland. It is as if they decided that artists and rock poets will tell us what will happen. The book is an attempt to answer."

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