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Russian Pop Singer Powers Through On English Songs

By Lena Smirnova

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Pop singer Sergei Lazarev

The days when Soviet censors pored over musical compositions in search of something to delete or modify are long gone, but that does not mean that radio stations and music channels do not have an unofficial taboo list of songs that they cannot play.

The new target, as strange as it sounds in a country that enthusiastically sings along to foreign lyrics, may actually be English songs. That is, English songs performed by Russian artists.

Pop singer Sergei Lazarev knows this all too well. His repertoire is mostly English because he likes to collaborate with foreign authors and identifies more with their musical tastes. But this love of English songs has been met with resistance at the central Russian radio stations and channels.

Despite this quiet resistance, Lazarev said he did not intend to switch to Russian-language songs.

"I don't want to cave in to the Russian format. I don't want to cave in to the format of Russian radio stations. I want to do what I like," he said.

Lazarev started to sing in English when he joined the popular '90s child group "Neposedy." Since he has an ear for music, it was easy to copy the different languages of the cover songs they sang.

In 2002, Lazarev became part of the successful pop duet Smash!!, which specialized in English songs, and by the time he went on to his solo career in 2005, he was able to speak the language rather than just imitate it. He has now released four albums and, most recently, recorded a single with the American rapper T-Pain.

Originally a theater student, the singer also regularly plays leading roles in Moscow's Pushkin Theater, for which he has even won several awards.

Sergei Lazarev sat down with The Moscow Times on the eve of his 30th birthday and a big solo concert at Olimpiisky Stadium to talk about his love of English, clashes with the leading music channels, duet with T-Pain and the jokes that make him laugh.

Q: How did you get interested in Western music and start to perform songs in English?

A: To be honest, in school I was exceptionally bad at studying English and understood little of it. If somebody were to tell me that I would build my career on singing songs in the English language, it's unlikely that I would have believed him.

As an adult, English was also practically forced on me because when we created the band Smash, we signed a contract with Universal Music. At that time, t.A.T.u and Alsou started singing in English and had big breakthroughs. Our project originally was positioned as an international project — two boys who sing in English. It was then that I got closely acquainted with English because Vlad, the other soloist, studied in England for three years and was fluent in English. At that time, I could only speak from transcripts. We wrote songs mostly in London, and British sound producers touched up my pronunciation. Around 2004, when we had the first successful album in English and some international promotion started, I started to realize that I didn't just need to reproduce English on disks and at concerts, but also, preferably, to speak it. I went through an English First course and started to learn the language. By the time I started to sing solo, it had become normal to me.

In regards to Western music, I just like to listen to it more. This happened to me in adolescent age. Before then, much like my compatriots, I preferred Russian music. And then I had this "break" and I started to listen to more foreign music.

Q: How do Russian audiences respond to you singing in English?

A: At first, this always raised questions — why and what for – but now everyone has come to terms with it and understands that this is the path that I've chosen. Of course, it is easier for a Russian person to understand Russian songs and to sing along to them. I get that. But I am also doing this for myself. I like working with foreign authors, and I like the musical tastes

of foreign minds who aren't familiar with the stagnation of the Soviet era stage.

Of course, it is harder to promote English songs. It's hard to promote them on the radio. The central channels don't like them. There are always problems getting an English song out there. It is easier for them to put in a Russian one. I've been cut out of broadcast programs at times because I sang in English. If before they cut me out, now at the dialogue phase about my involvement in the concert, they tell me, "just not in English." I can't say that it's a complete ban, but each time you have to get over some barriers and coax people.

The same with radio stations. There are some radio stations whose format does not allow them to play music in English. There are television music channels that are focused on Russian artists who sing in Russian. Despite the fact that I'm Russian, they don't put me in their lineup because, "sorry, you're singing in English." I think it's nonsense.

Q: You have said you aim for your work to be at a "Western standard." What does that mean to you?

A: It's the American approach; it's professionalism. People approach any musical product or show responsibly. People understand that it's a business, that they can earn money there, but at the same time, they know how to experiment and evolve. In our country, people are more conservative and it's hard to move them from the point where they have been stuck for a long time. In America, there are more experiments. People like new things, at least in terms of music.

Q: What was it like working with T-Pain on your recently released single and video?

A: I liked that, despite the fact that this is a person with a big name in America and two Grammies, he went through the whole filming process without any problems or whims, and treated everyone as an equal.

Q: You signed a contract with Sony Music in 2010. Have they met your expectations in terms of promoting you to a Western audience?

A: Not yet. I recorded "Electric Touch" independently and they licensed it. The fourth album, "Lazarev," was recorded in collaboration with Sony. They participated in the choice of songs, among other things, and so the hopes for that album are greater. Plus, there are some collaborations there. The duet with T-Pain couldn't have taken placen without the company's involvement.

I'm not losing hope that something will happen. In any case, I'm working to my full ability, so if everything happens at once, I will be prepared for this. If they tell me, "Seryozha, tomorrow we start touring Europe," I know that I have something to show.

Q: How else do you try to promote yourself to a Western audience? Your Twitter and website are still only available in Russian.

A: We are now working to translate the website because people can click on the link about T-Pain, but if they want to learn about me, they'll see Cyrillic letters. I think I'll come up with something for Twitter as well because there are quite a lot of fans in places outside of Russia already.

I was in Mexico in January when I went into a store to buy a SIM card for a local phone and was talking to the Mexican cashier, and I was completely surprised when all of a sudden he said, "are you the singer Sergey Lazarev?" To which I said, "Da."

Fans abroad want me to write more in English, and I am thinking about it, but since Twitter is such a quick thing that I update it sometimes in the car while driving, it would be hard to do it simultaneously in English and Russian.

Q: What about taking on an English pseudonym, like Alexei Vorobyov who calls himself Alex Sparrow?

A: We thought about a pseudonym for a long time. Since Sergei Lazarev is very long we decided that I'll be just Lazarev. But I never wanted to take any pseudonym — a completely different one — because it is still my name, given to me at birth, and I wouldn't want to sacrifice it.

Q: You have said numerous times that you don't want to participate in the "Eurovision" singing contest. But will it not help to get the international career that you are aiming for?

A: I don't think so. I can't remember any significant names among the winners of the Eurovision contest over the last 10 years. For all who won, it didn't help them in any way. Take even our winner from Russia, Dima Bilan. This victory unquestionably raised him to new heights in Russia and made him a national hero. But in his European career, it didn't help him at all. Nothing happened because it doesn't depend on "Eurovision". It depends on the company, record label and the musical material. "Eurovision" can sort of help you, but just as likely it can play a cruel prank on you and brand you with something that is a lot like a reality show.

Q: You have previously spoken about wanting to move to the United States and now repeat that you do not want to participate in "Eurovision". Would you consider yourself patriotic?

A: I'm not rejecting that I'm Russian. No, it's the opposite. I want to show that Russians are different. It's no secret that there are some serious stereotypes about Russians regarding their behavior, education, music and views on life. I, on the other hand, want to say to Europe that not all Russians are like this and that there are others who are well-educated, fantastic, intellectual, well-mannered people with good tastes in music and clothes.

I would represent Russia on an international musical arena with great pleasure, if such an opportunity arises. I will never run away from my nationality, but I will also never stoop down and put my name on something that is second-rate, something that I'm not interested in and that I don't like. Patriotism is patriotism but there is only one life and I want to live it so that afterward I'm not ashamed.

Q: If you were invited to sing at a different international platform, such as an Olympic Games ceremony in Sochi, would you agree?

A: Yes, with great pleasure. Especially if it was for Sochi. It's prestigious. It's cool. This is a platform that people will really see and see seriously because people don't watch the Olympic ceremonies to laugh, like some do with Eurovision.

Q: Your birthday coincides with April Fool's Day. What is the easiest way to make you laugh?

A: I like people with a sense of humor, funny stories, smart jokes and good acting. I don't like crude jokes at all. In general, I get happy seeing sincerity in people. Everyone is so closed in now, all in their shells, but when you see real emotions, this brings on a smile right away. In America, I get ecstatic when I see people smiling, asking you how you are, when a passerby nods and smiles at you as if in greeting. There is a lack of this among Russian people.

Q: So what is stopping you from smiling in Russia?

A: Nothing! I do it all the time and try to persuade people that they need to be more open as often as possible.

Sergei Lazarev performs in a solo concert on March 30 at 8 p.m. at Olimpiisky Stadium, located at 16/1 Olimpiisky Prospekt. Phone: +7 495-786-3333. www.olimpik.ru

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