

29-Year-Old Band Drinks From Fountain of Youth

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Evgeny Khavtan and the band Bravo are still a hit with young audiences.

In its first official concert, the rock-and-roll band Bravo got an ovation like no other.

Just a few minutes into the show that was held in 1984, a slew of policemen crowded the stage and arrested the band members. The leading vocalist was tasked to do hard labor outside of Moscow while the band itself was put on a state blacklist.

The authorities had two main peeves about Bravo. First, the band members sang uncensored songs that drew inspiration from Western rock-and-roll. To top it off, they dressed accordingly – bright, bold, and completely out of line with the uniform-like styles sold in stores.

Their image was that of the West-oriented “stilyagi” who had infiltrated the Soviet youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s and who more straight-laced Soviet youth chased with scissors

or other wardrobe-maiming devices.

Despite the hiccup at their first concert, the colorful Bravo ensemble eventually managed to climb out of the underground scene — and exploded in popularity.

The band's hit songs about the benefits of loving pilots over homely boys, a mustachioed major who woos girls at a resort town, and that irreplaceable feature of the stilyaga wardrobe, the "stylish orange tie," took over radio stations and dance floors, while new songs continue to pour in.

Bravo did a mix of their latest album "Moda" in Los Angeles with the American producer Ghian Wright, who has previously worked with such big names as Paul McCartney, Janet Jackson and Oasis. The album itself was recorded in the Moscow region, in the garage of the band's unchanging leader Yevgeny Khavtan.

Now, with 14 albums to their name, the band members no longer wear the bright stilyagi getups, but their concerts are still as upbeat as ever. Tellingly, one of their main audiences, as in the 1980s, is young people, out on the hunt for that rock-and-roll energy.

The Moscow Times spoke to the band's leader, composer and guitarist Yevgeny Khavtan, about growing up in the 1960s, being a stilyaga, and the secret of Bravo's eternal youth.

Q: Foreign music, especially rock, has had a big influence on Soviet musicians. Why hasn't there been any influence of Soviet or Russian rock on Western music?

A: Western rock was born in the West, not here. Over there it is the traditional form of music. We in Russia have strong ballet and classical opera schools. They have roots here. This is why nobody plays our Russian folk songs somewhere in Jamaica or Hawaii. These songs were born here. In Russia, this is our traditional music. The motherland of American rock-and-roll is America, and in America this is the traditional form of music. Their music has different melodies, different rhythms.

Q: It was popular in the Soviet period to sing foreign songs even though many people didn't know English and didn't understand what they were singing about. Your mother was an English-language teacher. Did you understand the lyrics of the songs that you sang?

A: I listened to this music, but I started to tune in to the lyrics much later because I am a composer and for me the melody has always been the most important. If the melody is interesting, then I start to listen to the lyrics. The first Western songs that I heard, I didn't understand anything. Plus, it is very hard to pick apart what they are singing about because of their English accent.

After I graduated from school and university, 10 to 15 years later, I started to travel abroad. I went to America, England, Europe in general, and then I started to communicate in English, started to understand it and to listen to the lyrics. Many of the bands disappointed me because the music turned out to be much better than the words of the songs. There were also some very good bands with very good lyrics, but there are few of these unfortunately. About 30

percent of the bands have good lyrics, I think, while 70 percent have no relation to poetry whatsoever.

Q: When you reached maturity in the 1980s, the “stilyagi” movement was out of style. Why did you become a stilyaga then?

A: It's an individual choice. Every person chooses the kind of music that corresponds with his personal spirit. I had always liked the esthetic of the 1950s and 1960s. During my childhood I watched the films from that era; American films, black-and-white films, rock-and-roll films. Somehow this time is very close to me. I adore the 1950s and 1960s and think that this is the most interesting time in the development of music, fashion and cinema.

The music of this time is very close to me. I can't explain why. There is just something in it. There is a different energy in that era, different clothes.

Q: The clothes are very important to your image?

A: Clothes, yes. I love to dress well. I have always loved to dress well, when I had money and even when I didn't have money, during my student years. It was always important for me how I look and consequently, how my band looks.

Q: Bravo has experienced fairly frequent changes of its members, including the leading vocalists. Do you have to alter the image of the band every time one of the musicians leaves?

A: It is very good that there are these image changes, otherwise we would now be a group that is playing 30-year-old songs. The changes don't let us relax and force us to keep evolving constantly. They also give us the opportunity to record new songs; It is not good to perform only the old ones. This is a normal approach to art, first of all for me as a composer. I have always taken new steps in my work and am myself changing with the times.

Q: When your group turned 15, you said your “stilyagi” period had passed. But was this not the unique feature of your band and would it not be profitable to maintain the stereotype?

A: The stereotype has stayed even though we don't look like stilyagi. I don't wear a tie anymore because I just don't like wearing ties. It would probably be more profitable to stay in the genre that led us to a commercial breakthrough, but this doesn't interest me. I'm interested in moving forward. Using what we had then to work now, well, that would be funny. The bands that play the same songs year after year look the same and act the same just to keep their audiences, that is not interesting. I follow the careers of my Western idols and the ones that I find most interesting are in fact those that are changing with time, even if these changes cause them to lose some commercial profit.

Q: Bravo always has very energetic concerts, with bright costumes and songs. You tour a lot as well. How important is it for you to have live concerts? Could Bravo become a band that only

records albums in the studio, but does not perform?

A: I like working in the studio, but I don't feel a connection with the audience if I don't have concert performances. It is not enough for me to receive comments from our fans over the Internet. I need a live link with them. I write songs and I need to see the reactions to these songs. Nothing can replace the live communication that happens at a concert so it is very important for me and for the band as well. Plus, what we do at concerts is much more interesting than what we do in the studio.

Q: Do you perform abroad frequently?

A: There was a period when we traveled a lot. This was due to perestroika, it was in the mid 1980s. We had contracts in Scandinavia. We released an album there and had a tour in Scandinavia. We played in London several years ago, but at the same time I fully comprehend that our main spectators are the Russian-language people who live there. Our main market is in Russia, and for this reason we don't travel abroad often.

Q: Do you have an interest in performing songs in English?

A: We had several songs in English, but here I realize that this was just an experiment, not more than that. I realize that the likelihood of us achieving success in the West is pathetically small.

Q: Bravo has a lot of young fans now. Why might they be interested in a band that was created before some of them were born?

A: The youth finds something interesting and fresh in our songs. For probably 10 years now, there has been a stagnation in Russian music. There are no new ideas. Even over the past 20 years no big names have appeared. And whenever there is nothing new, people always look backwards.

I think that in the roots of the music we play, there is this energy, this rock-and-roll of the 1960s. This is a living force, which will never disappear, at any time. It will never change.

Bravo performs on April 19 at 8 p.m. at Arena Moscow, located at 31/4 Leningradsky Prospekt. Phone: +7 495-940-6755. www.arenagroup.ru.

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