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Zemfira to Live in Your Head For Long

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Zemfira is finally touring again until the beginning of June, stopping in Germany and Finland in addition to Russia. **Zemfira**

KAZAN — "In order to make a change, I will need to die." One of the most memorable lines from Zemfira's last record sounds like both a life prescription and an explanation of why Russia is known as a country of both ambivalence and sharp sensitivity.

Over the last 15 years, the 36-year-old singer-songwriter of Bashkir-Tatar origins has emerged to parallel her own fractured emotional life to the one of the whole country. As a result, you can never see such unity of soul and so much human attachment as during her live shows, where many people become at ease and let go of their inner emotional burdens.

Moody, self-assured and enigmatic, Zemfira, who remains to be one of the few genuinely popular and active artists in the country, hasn't released an album in six years. On Feb. 1, Afisha magazine announced that the new record "To Live in Your Head" (Zhit v Tvoei Golove) will be released in just two weeks and distributed for free on the Yandex.Music service.

The news hit headlines as the public realized that what it spent six years waiting for would happen within days. A concert tour around Russia as well as Eastern Europe was announced with a few leaks suggesting that it would involve the best stage production and the most lucid and powerful sound, with a German sound producer at its helm.

The album was downloaded six million times in only three weeks, which set a new record for the Russian musical industry.

On March 28, I was sitting on a train heading east, where just 11 hours from Moscow lies Tatarstan's cultural stronghold, Kazan, where Zemfira was slated to perform next.

People in the train car appeared to resemble the kind of passengers that you expect to see heading toward Kazan, including an old Tatar lady who wrapped her purse in a colorful ornamental cloth and put it under her head. She did not seem to be able to sleep the whole night out of fear that someone would steal the purse, or was it the cloth?

As night went along, it appeared that half the train was going to Zemfira's concert — so far no solo shows have been scheduled in Moscow. Zemfira's rare appearances in Moscow and St. Petersburg are, in fact, not a big barrier for her fans, some of which proudly declare that they have experienced 77 shows, as though they are World War II flying aces announcing the number of their victories.

When Zemfira arrived on the Russian pop scene in 1999, she seemed to touch upon people's most vulnerable sensitivities, such as the general feeling of frustration that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the young generation found that the experience of their parents was useless to help them navigate the increasingly complex Russia of the 1990s and 2000s.

And so they turned to rock music for inspiration and guidance. Zemfira appeared to be the most touching and honest among other performers.

Her show in Kazan resembled a naked pulsating nerve that was on a brink of a breakdown, but the fact that it did not fall apart was a testimony to its strength.

"It is very hard to be a Zemfira," said one of the spectators.

As one observed the ravished crowd, it was evident that no matter how hard it was, it was very rewarding for her too.

One can judge a record in terms of its artistic ambition and the extent to which it is fulfilled, as well as in terms of its public appeal. Zemfira is the only contemporary Russian artist that has achieved outstanding success without turning into a pedestrian pop star.

"To Live in Your Head" is a record with density and very little light, but this only adds up in terms of the human touch and subtlety of its sound. There is a certain strain of zealousness in this work, as throughout the record you are faced with a deceptive feeling of simplicity that is coupled with devotional artistic achievement.

In contrast to some of her previous albums, Zemfira tries to achieve a lot with only a handful of tools, polishing them to perfection as much as she can. Thus, guitar reigns here, though its

texture is not plain, but obfuscated with sharp tones and bold riffs.

Unlike most Russian artists, Zemfira always contextualizes her work not just within the Russian music environment, but also in the context of world music — thus it is easy to spot Bon Iver, The XX, My Bloody Valentine among the inspirations, with Radiohead and especially Thom Yorke's "Eraser" as the main reference points.

Zemfira shows how to deal with our age of hypocrisy with private intimacy and strong spirit. What you see on the stage is her own struggle to deal with the burden of being plain and truthful in a world full of macabre lies.

On the way back, 150 Moscow football fans would not let the train depart Kazan, as though the overall experience had to last longer. But once your imagination has acquainted itself with Zemfira, she will live in your head for a long time. Perhaps forever.

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