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Arkady Kots: Riot Folk From Moscow

By Sergei Chernov

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Moscow band Arkady Kots is one of the most interesting phenomena on Russia's politically conscious music scene. Inspired by Woody Guthrie, Billy Bragg, Chumbawamba and contemporary political rock, the band draws its repertoire from 1930s anti-fascist songs, workers' songs and Russian revolutionary poetry.

Their best known songs include "Walls (Let's Destroy This Prison)," a Russian version of Catalan singer-songwriter Lluis Llach's song "L'Estaca," whose tune was adopted as the anthem of the pro-democracy Solidarity trade-union movement in Poland in the 1980s.

Arkady Kots' video featured the band performing the song in a police paddy wagon after the musicians were detained for supporting Pussy Riot outside a Moscow court last year. The St. Petersburg Times spoke with founding member, poet and translator Kirill Medvedev ahead of the band's concert on New Holland Island on Sunday, Aug. 4.

Q: How did the band come together? Who are its members?

A: In 2004, I wrote several songs to poems by [Russian artist, poet and political activist] Alexander Brener from his book "Oranges for Palestine." I recorded them and posted them on the Internet. Later, in 2007, there was an important student protest campaign at Moscow State University's sociology faculty against the poor quality of education, the administration's reactionary policies and the high prices at the canteen.

I went to interview Oleg Zhuravlyov, one of the more active people taking part in those events. He turned out to be a great lover of poetry. We became friends and, upon his suggestion, started recording songs for poems by Brener and, later, performing them in public. So the group can be said to have its beginnings in student rebellion.

They were all, by the way, expelled from the university [after the protests]. Later, we were joined by the well-known artist [Nikolai] Oleinikov, a member of the Chto Delat political art group. We decided that we could do anything from then on and eventually expanded the band to seven members.

Q: What is the group's agenda? It seems far from your typical band, starting from having "collective leadership."

A: We want to combine activism and creativity, a clear-cut political position and total creative freedom—things that are frequently in conflict. But I think it is this conflict that lets us develop. We are non-professionals, but we don't want to win over audiences solely through our activist stance.

We believe that it is very important to work on developing musical forms. We are prepared to perform in all sorts of different contexts, be it at rallies, political events or festivals around social issues. But we are also happy to play under more sterile typical conditions, with decent sound. We want to make people (and ourselves) think.

We are involved in activism, but we also like it when audiences dance at our concerts. Essentially, we want everything at the same time. "Revolution doesn't need tragic but rather tropical rhythms," as [Soviet poet] Yevgeny Yevtushenko once wrote.

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