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Chinawoman Heads Back to Her Russian Roots

By Sarah Crowther

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Chinawoman, born in Canada to Russian immigrants, will play for the third time in Moscow this Wednesday.

Singer-songwriter Michelle Gurevich, better known by her stage name Chinawoman, is not one for easy stereotypes. Gurevich, born in Canada to Russian immigrants, was raised in north Toronto's Russian community before moving to Berlin in 2010.

Gurevich's first language was Russian, and Russia's culture and music still permeate her sound. When she was a child, both her family's home and Toronto's Russian restaurants had cassettes of Russian pop songs on constant replay.

"At the time the cassettes just said 'songs,'" she told The Moscow Times, with that same deep voice evident in her music. "It wasn't balalaikas, just a mix of pure pop. And it wasn't till I was older that I actually knew what was on there."

What was on there was a lot of Alla Pugachyova, Russia's queen of pop, whom Gurevich still admires for her onstage ability to go "from super-drama to super-trash," she said.

Chinawoman's songs don't have a "trashy" element, but there is something of Pugachyova's pop edge in Gurevich's songs, which have also drawn comparisons to Leonard Cohen and Nico.

"I'd definitely say [my sound is] ballady," she said. "[At the beginning] I had never sung before, so I was experimenting. Do I sing in a falsetto?"

But she eventually settled on a quieter sound that would let her practice without anyone knowing she was at home. "I ended up finding this mellow way of singing" she laughed.

Gurevich keeps a mellow, enigmatic air when it comes to herself too. She prefers to keep her age a mystery. "Whenever people meet me, they always say, 'oh, you're so much younger than we expected!' I like to keep it like that — have people think I'm older."

"Russian Ballerina," one of Chinawoman's best-known songs, was written for Gurevich's mother, a former Kirov ballerina, on her birthday. It mixes Gurevich's vocals, poppy guitar and not a little humor:

"It takes 10 years just to get

Your stinking leg up

Then five more to make it

Not look like sh--"

Gurevich played her first show in 2010, at Graffiti's Bar in Toronto's eclectic Kensington neighborhood. Soon afterward she was invited to play a show in Poland, which was her first as Chinawoman. As if by fate, Eastern Europe continues to be the home of her biggest fan base.

"Actually, the Russians were the first to notice my music. What happened was when I first put my music online, I didn't have a manager or anything, it was like Sasha from Scarborough [a Toronto suburb] who sent it to someone in Russia. And now it's moving to Western Europe."

Since 2010, Gurevich has performed all over Europe. This will be her third time onstage in Moscow. "It's always a good crowd," she said.

Chinawoman will be performing at club Teatr *on Wednesday at 8 p.m. 20 Staraya Basmannaya Ulitsa. Metro Kurskaya. 495-228-2080.*

Editor's note: This article has been amended to reflect the fact that Gurevich said that she liked that "people think I'm older" rather than "younger."

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