

Sex, Drugs and Excess: Russia's Music Scene in the '90s

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Singer Ilya Lagutenko of the Russian group Mumiy Troll.

Artemy Troitsky for [Calvert Journal](#)

The 1980s were divided into two five-year periods in Russia, one black, one white. First there were the [throes of Soviet power](#) played out to the accompaniment of an extraordinary carnival of underground art: from the Necrorealist film genre, to [Ilya Kabakov's](#) art works and [Pyotr Mamonov's](#) hypnotic rock.

This was followed by the era of [perestroika and glasnost](#) — economic policies of "openness" and "restructuring" — where everything was for sale. The 1980s ended up like a lunar landscape: its heroes, like musician [Viktor Tsoy](#), rock singer [Mike Naumenko](#), and avant-garde musician Sergey Kuryokhin, were dead, or — if saleable on the international market — living abroad.

There had been a paradigm shift. Where once cultural life in the U.S.S.R. was led in conditions of all-encompassing censorship, isolation from the ideologically unclean "outside world," and the complete absence of a market economy, now things were changing.

For all its obvious costs, this oppressive system also provided a range of secret weapons: It generated a devil-may-care dissident spirit, a distinctive identity. You could become the idol of millions without going on television once; you could create a smash hit while stoking a boiler or cleaning the streets; you could experiment without sparing a thought for sales.

Perestroika brought an end to censorship and lifted the Iron Curtain, and in the 1990s, led to the introduction of the long-awaited market.

Money, which up to then had meant little, suddenly meant everything. And the high priests of this cult of cash were the engineers of the 1990s: the gangsters and the "New Russians." Russia suddenly switched from a position of "everything is forbidden" to "nothing is off limits": one-sixth of the world's surface found itself in a state of anarchy. The government reacted only to the day-to-day political agenda, and the rest were left to their own devices, the mantra being "grab as much as you can."

Piling on the pleasure

In theory, this all sounds fantastic: freedom, a fresh start, "unlimited impossibilities." In practice, however, it all came out a bit twisted. The first thing that the 1980s generation of anti-Soviet youth did, once they'd been given carte blanche in this new landscape, was to pile on the pleasure.

A good example of this was rave and club culture. I was involved with some of the first dance events in Moscow, in the winter of 1991 and the spring of 1992. Nights like Gagarin Party and Technoir, put on in St Petersburg, headed by Ivan Salmaksov. Everything was mixed together in a friendly stew of glamour, cocaine and criminality.

They were a big success and so, the very next moment, the rave movement was co-opted by Komsomol, the former youth wing of the Communist Party that had an afterlife as a gangster organization after the U.S.S.R. disbanded. Salmaksov went missing, [presumed dead](#), and these fashionable neo-futurist parties were reborn as drug-fueled gangster orgies.

Or take showbusiness: The first attempts at making quality pop music by the likes of [Natalia Vetlitskaya](#) and [Anzhelika Varum](#) — packaged in stylish videos — fell prey to cunning "producers," and as a result a fairly horrific genre of music known as [popsa](#) appeared everywhere. The only alternatives were boring "sh-trock" (govnorok) and "[Russian chanson](#)" ... It's the same story with cinema, design and media. Everything was mixed together in a friendly stew of glamour, cocaine and criminality.

Apolitical mass media

The decadent free-for-all of Russia at the end of the 20th century left behind very little that was artistically and intellectually convincing. One exception might be literature, like the works of [Viktor Pelevin](#) and [Vladimir Sorokin](#), or, in part, visual art — like painters [Vinogradov-Dubossarsky](#), artist [Oleg Kulik](#), and photographer Boris Mikhailov.

The culture crowd of the 1990s didn't form any clearly articulated movements or styles; here, as with the gangsters, it was everyone themselves, you against the world, but there were some general themes.

First, it tended to be flagrantly apolitical. Surprising, but true: the extraordinarily dramatic social cataclysms of that period — the reforms and the mass impoverishment of the population at the beginning of the decade; a popular uprising in Moscow, with the storming of the Ostankino television station and the bombardment of the parliament building; the war in Chechnya; the economic crisis and default of 1998 — all had little impact on the cultural production of the time.

Second, there was an absolute focus on the media. Unlike the underground of the 1980s, which didn't have access to the professional press and so created its own homemade, but effective, way of being (the samizdat dissident movement, apartment gigs, word-of-mouth and other DIY endeavors), in the 90s everything was honed for mass media.

If you weren't in the trendy magazines (Ptyuch, OM) or on the fashionable television shows (Dryoma, Cafe Oblomov), then you didn't exist. Lots of musicians of that period — from the crazy art-punk group Chimera to the psycho-bard Venya Drkin — never really took off largely because they didn't fit the infamous "radio format" ... Whereas a ton of glam hacks got all the glory.

Russian Britpop

The third tendency of culture of this time was parochialism. Here the main ingredient was borrowings from trends in western mass culture: like "[Russian Britpop](#)," the "Russian Tarantino," or the Russian "[Generation X](#)."

Russia, its doors flung open to the world, could not offer it any new Maleviches, Stravinskys or Eisensteins.

All of us, of course, can also recall moments that were culturally worthwhile from that time. My own favorites include the films of Maxim Pezhemsky and Yufit, the performance art of Vladik Monroe and Pirate TV, the art-rock songs of N.O.M. and the rapping of Delfin.

But most of the artifacts of that era will be wiped from our memory, like a line of cocaine in the club toilets at [Manhattan Express](#) — which has itself already been swept away, along with the Hotel Rossiya where it was once homed.

All that will remain are vague memories of shootouts in nightclubs and Mumiy Troll's 1997 song [Run Away!](#)

And, of course, Boris Yeltsin, [the era's appropriately drunken conductor](#).

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