The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

When the Legendary Soviet Bard Vladimir Vysotsky Hit Hollywood

By Carl Schreck

September 07, 2015

Rare photograph of Vysotsky and Vlady in the 1970s at the home of their friend Michael Mish in Los Angeles.

On a balmy summer evening in the posh Los Angeles neighborhood of Pacific Palisades, movie stars and industry players mingled around the pool and on the veranda, nursing drinks and clouding the air with plumes of expensive cigar smoke.

The partygoers, according to witnesses, included Hollywood royalty and rising talent alike: Gregory Peck, Natalie Wood, Liza Minnelli, Robert De Niro, Anthony Hopkins, Michael Douglas, and Sylvester Stallone, whose film "Rocky" would make him a worldwide star after its release four months later in November 1976.

A stranger dressed in pale blue maneuvered his short, sturdy frame through the crowd as well. His intense eyes "glistened with excitement" on that evening, and an implant of the anti-alcoholism drug disulfiram had helped liberate him temporarily from his bondage to the

bottle, his wife would later write.

At some point during the evening, the host of the party, Hollywood producer Mike Medavoy, introduced the man, who had brought his own seven-string guitar to the star-studded gathering.

"He took the guitar, sat in the living room, and played," Medavoy told RFE/RL.

Only a handful of guests knew that the man delivering this impromptu performance in Russian, Vladimir Vysotsky, was among the most famous people in the Soviet Union — a land hidden behind the Iron Curtain at the time, deep in the Cold War.

"It was a typical party in Hollywood with lots of people in the business, some who knew each other and others who didn't," said Medavoy, who has been involved in seven Best Picture Oscar-winners and at the time served as head of production at United Artists. "And the thing that was different was having Vysotsky. Obviously, nobody knew who he was."

That was something that Vysotsky, who died 35 years ago, had hoped to change in what turned out to be the final chapter of his short, hard-lived life. Vysotsky's iconic status in his homeland derived from his poignant, ironic and cleverly subversive songs — delivered in a passionate, guttural rasp — that circulated hand-to-hand on underground recordings across the Soviet Union's 11 time zones. But he was also a Soviet stage and movie star. And having already conquered the hearts of his compatriots, in his last years Vysotsky turned his ambitions toward Tinseltown, where he hobnobbed with celebrities and ultimately sought to make a splash on the silver screen.

For Vysotsky, the concert at Medavoy's house would become a launching point of sorts for this mission, his inaugural plunge deep into the exclusive world of Hollywood stardom with his wife, the French actress Marina Vlady, by his side.

"I was struck about how happy he seemed to be there," said Medavoy, "and how excited both he and Marina were about discovering this brand new world."

Vladimir OKC / Wikicommons

Bolshoi Karetny pereulok 15, central Moscow. A house where Vladimir Vysotsky spent his early years from 1949 to 1955.

Anti-Establishment Folk Hero

The world of Vysotsky's songs, which he began composing and performing in the early 1960s, was not one of Hollywood-style glamor. He sang about the hypocrisy and myriad absurdities that pervaded everyday life in the Soviet Union, about convicts and hustlers, about gulags and the tragic plights of those doomed by war.

These songs made Vysotsky a folk hero in the Soviet Union, a beloved champion of the struggling everyman. His legendary status in Russia endures: Vysotsky finished second only to Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin — the first human in space — in a 2010 nationwide poll surveying Russians on their 20th-century idols.

Soviet authorities were less keen — officially, at least — about his work and long refused to distribute his music or publish his poetry. Soviet officials and the state-controlled press in the late 1960s lobbed epithets like "anti-Soviet scum" at Vysotsky and accused him of producing "immoral, smutty songs."

Yet Vysotsky was not a dissident in the mold of Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Andrei Sakharov. His songs deftly stopped short of overt anti-government sentiment. Instead, he couched his criticism in metaphors, allegories, humorous wordplay and sly needling. In Vysotsky's song "Instructions Before A Trip Abroad," the narrator says: "He gave me a brochure to read as

an order, not to dare act as stupidly there as we do at home."

While authorities choked off his access to state-run recording labels and refused to publish his poetry, Vysotsky reportedly gained fans among senior officials who, like millions of other Soviet citizens, listened to black-market recordings of songs he played before small groups at his friends' apartments. He was allowed to work as an actor, as well as perform concerts. And he had access to perks that most Soviet citizens only dreamed of, such as sufficient funds and permission to travel abroad. Vysotsky took advantage of this privilege and crisscrossed the world — from Paris, where Vlady lived, to the United States, and even Tahiti in the South Pacific.

But it was in the United States specifically where Vysotsky, who spoke English poorly, ultimately wanted to test himself, according to his friend, Valery Yanklovich.

"He felt that he could work in America," Yanklovich said in the 1998 Russian-language documentary "Vladimir Vysotsky in America." "He thought that he might be understood even in America."

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A now-Moscow Times photographer captured this memorable glimpse of Vysotsky performing at a 1976 concert.

'Who Is This Guy?'

Vysotsky's singular growl reverberated through Medavoy's house and drifted out into the California night, drawing the attention of guests milling about in the backyard.

"As he kept singing with his rough voice and delivery, others were coming in [saying]: 'Who is this guy singing like this?'" said Dick Finn, a retired Los Angeles-based businessman and a friend of Vysotsky's, who attended the party. "They were mesmerized by his performance."

Finn, 74, hosted Vysotsky and Vlady several times in Los Angeles. He recalled in a recent interview with RFE/RL that De Niro and Minnelli, who were shooting the Martin Scorcese-directed film "New York, New York" at the time, came to the party straight from the set, still wearing their costumes.

Minnelli, who declined through her spokesman to be interviewed, was "sitting almost at [Vysotsky's] feet," and Vysotsky appeared "encouraged by her gaze," Vlady wrote in her 1987 memoir "Vladimir, Or The Aborted Flight."

Vlady, who also declined an interview request, did not indicate which songs her husband played that night. Finn, however, recalls that he played one of his most famous, "Capricious Horses," a desperate, angst-filled allegory whose narrator lashes his steeds as they pull him along the edge of a cliff toward his "final refuge," even as he implores them to slow down.

"No one [at the party] understood a word," the Czech director Milos Forman said in "There Are No Prophets In A Prophet's Land," a 1981 Russian-language documentary about Vysotsky produced in the United States. "But everyone understood that these are deep songs, honest songs, that they were written with all of his heart."

Rubbing Shoulders With Hollywood

Vysotsky gave his performance at Medavoy's party on the first of his several visits to the United States in the late 1970s. The trip offered other opportunities to socialize with Hollywood stars and power brokers as well, including a pool party hosted by the comedian and screenwriter Buck Henry. During the gathering, Vysotsky frolicked with the ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov, whom Vysotsky had befriended before the dancer defected from the Soviet Union two years earlier. The reunited friends "splashed around in the pool like children," while Vysotsky executed "acrobatic jumps" into the pool and "raised a ruckus," Vlady wrote later.

Also present at the pool party were Forman and the actress Jessica Lange, with whom Baryshnikov would later have a daughter. In a 2014 interview, the Russian late-night television host Ivan Urgant asked Lange about a photograph taken of her, Forman, Vysotsky, and Vlady — all wearing bathing suits — poolside with a sprawling panorama of Los Angeles in the background. Lange said she met Vysotsky in Los Angeles and Paris, adding that "he would play guitar and he would sing when we were just sitting around in the evening."

Vysotsky also spent his time in California reveling in the state's warm weather, stunning natural beauty, and tourist attractions like Disneyland, which Vysotsky had been talking about on their 1976 trip "ever since Moscow," Vlady recalls in her memoir, which is written in the second person as if she is addressing Vysotsky. The couple arrived at the theme park and managed to hit "all of the rides" and shows, she says.

"It's clear," she writes, "from your wide-open eyes, which leap from object to object, and your joyous face that you are enthralled with this spectacle."

A Brush With Bronson

In her memoir, Vlady describes Vysotsky as starstruck by the audience he would perform for at Medavoy's party. "You elbow me, and like an enchanted young boy pronounce the names of the actors out loud," she writes.

Missing from the crowd, however, was his favorite Hollywood actor, a rugged star with Russian and Lithuanian heritage who, like Vysotsky, handled tough-guy roles: Charles Bronson.

Vysotsky had hoped to meet Bronson not only because he admired the American actor's work, but also because he wanted revenge, according to a story repeated by Vlady and Vysotsky's friends. The story, which bears a hint of the apocryphal, begins weeks before the party, in Montreal, where Vysotsky was recording some of his songs at a studio. Late one night, Vysotsky, who suffered from insomnia, left his hotel room and went out on a balcony, where he encountered Bronson smoking.

"Volodya came up to him quickly and said, 'Mr. Bronson,'" Vysotsky's friend, the artist Mikhail Shemyakin, said in "No Prophets." "[Vysotsky] spoke English very, very badly, but he wanted to explain that he loved him and that he's a Russian poet, a Russian singer, and just to talk. For him, this was an extraordinary meeting."

Bronson, who died in 2003, purportedly responded with a gruffness and brevity befitting his on-screen persona: "Go away."

The dissident Soviet emigre writer Sergei Dovlatov later quoted Vysotsky as chalking up Bronson's brush-off to karma for an incident in Moscow when, in a foul mood "before a bender," he told an autograph-seeker late one night to scram.

Karma or not, Vysotsky said he was "so upset, to the core of my soul," that he "couldn't leave the hotel for an entire day," Shemyakin said in "No Prophets." He said Vysotsky told him that he was preparing to meet Hollywood actors after the stay in Montreal and "dreamed of exacting revenge."

"I swore that if Bronson comes up to me after my singing, I'm going to hand his words back to him," Shemyakin quoted Vysotsky as saying.

Michael Mish

Vysotsky and Vlady in Los Angeles

'I Love My Country'

After his sojourn in Los Angeles in August 1976, Vysotsky and Vlady flew to New York, where they stayed at Baryshnikov's apartment and met with the exiled Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky. During his stay, Vysotsky addressed the issue of his potential move to the West in a television interview with the renowned American journalist Dan Rather for the CBS network's flagship news magazine program 60 Minutes.

In the interview, Vysotsky dismissed Rather's suggestion that the Soviet leadership might have cause to worry about his possible defection.

"I've left the Soviet Union already four or five times and always returned," Vysotsky told Rather. "It's even funny, because I think if I was that kind of person, that they were afraid of letting me out of the country, we'd be having quite a different interview than we are having now. I'm sitting quietly, with you asking me the questions you want to ask me, and I'm answering them calmly. I love my country, and I don't want to do it any harm. And I will not."

After the interview aired the following year, a U.S. State Department official wrote in an unclassified cable published in 2014 by WikiLeaks that the 60 Minutes segment portrayed Vysotsky "as an example of officially tolerated dissent in the Soviet Union."

Barry Rubin, an American friend and translator of Brodsky's, told the Minnesota-based Vysotsky expert Mark Tsibulsky that the Soviet government might have been pleased with the interview because it showed that "if a dissident can go to Tahiti and perform in America, then things can't be that bad for him in his homeland."

Privately, Vysotsky was feeling increasingly shackled both creatively and personally in the Soviet Union, the late Soviet dissident writer Vasily Aksyonov said in the documentary "Vladimir Vysotsky in America." He describes a visit that Vysotsky and Vlady paid him at his home outside Moscow to seek his advice about whether to decamp across the Iron Curtain.

"What do you think? Is it worth it for me to move to the West? I can't take it anymore here. I'm suffocating," Aksyonov, who did not indicate in which year the meeting took place, quoted Vysotsky as saying.

Aksyonov said Vysotsky thought he could dry out if he moved abroad because he "connected his benders with being in his homeland and thought, naively of course, that it would be different" in the West. "He talked about maybe opening a Russian artistic club in New York," Aksyonov said. "And as far as I recall, I actively dissuaded him. It would be like, I don't know, Gagarin suddenly deciding to stay in the West."

'Amazing! Incredible!'

Exactly how long, and how many songs, Vysotsky played for his Hollywood audience in Medavoy's living room remains unclear. Vlady and Forman have said he played an hourlong set. Finn said Vysotsky performed one or two songs, while Medavoy, now the chairman and CEO of Phoenix Pictures, told RFE/RL that he "sang probably for a half-hour or more."

Vysotsky's rich and often slang-filled lyrics, which Brodsky so admired that he felt the guitar undermined their poetry, have flummoxed many a translator, though Vlady did her best to relay Vysotsky's words to the audience. Other accounts suggest Natalie Wood, the daughter of Russian immigrants who spoke heavily accented Russian, assumed interpreting duties as well.

Despite the language barrier, Vysotsky "definitely received a very, very warm applause" after he struck his final chord, said Finn, who was born to Polish Jews in an Arkhangelsk labor camp and whose friendship Vysotsky praised in a short poem penned in 1977. "I wouldn't call it more than that," he said.

Vlady recalled a stunned silence followed by a boisterous reception led by De Niro and Minnelli, whom she and Vysotsky had watched earlier in the day on the MGM set of "New York, New York." "You play the last song, and a long silence reigns," Vlady writes in her memoir. "Everyone stares at each other in disbelief. All of them are enthralled by the man in blue. Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro set the tone, shouting: 'Amazing! Incredible!'"

'I'm Really Famous'

Vysotsky returned to the United States each year from 1977 to 1979, visiting friends and playing concerts before enthusiastic emigre and academic crowds in several U.S. cities.

His fascination with various aspects of Americana persisted, according to recollections of Michael Mish, a musician who met Vysotsky through their mutual friend, Dick Finn.

In an Aug. 2, 1977, journal entry that he provided to RFE/RL, Mish wrote that Vysotsky "had an endless curiosity for the luxury associated with this, the Western culture."

"Pool in the backyard. Levi's jeans. Ice cream. Digital watches. A small boy of 39 in awe of the amethyst fountain of progress," he wrote, noting that Vlady and Vysotsky had stayed at his house two weeks earlier.

Mish added in the journal entry that Vysotsky dreamed of owning "a big trailer or Winnebago-type recreational vehicle." (The Soviet chess legend Anatoly Karpov has said that in the 1970s, he, Vysotsky, and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev owned the only three Mercedes cars in all of Moscow.)

Mish, who conversed with Vysotsky in French, told RFE/RL that Vysotsky was spellbound by the area's idyllic coastal scenery as well. Early one morning, he said, the two men walked up to a nearby bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

"As we approached the ocean, and the ocean started unveiling itself to us, he leaned into me and grabbed my forearm, and he said: 'I want to spend the whole day here tomorrow just looking at this,'" Mish said.

When they returned home, Vysotsky "did what he would often do, which was just to grab my forearm and press his thumb into my forearm to let me know that what he was about to say had import," he added. "And what he said was: 'You know, I'm really famous. There isn't a single Soviet that doesn't know who I am.'"

Igor Palmin / Wikicommons

Vysotsky in 1979

Vacation After War

Having already rubbed shoulders with Hollywood stars on their own turf, Vysotsky made his play for fame in the movie capital of the world in 1979. He returned to the United States for the final time in December of that year, arriving in Los Angeles hoping to convince Hollywood players to produce a screenplay he'd co-authored with a friend.

Reportedly written over the course of five days, the screenplay, titled "Vacation After War," tells the story of a Soviet pilot captured by the Nazis during World War II who manages to escape from a concentration camp together with a Polish and a French solider. Adventure ensues, including their capture by an American military patrol that suspects they are SS agents. Vysotsky envisioned himself starring in the film alongside French actor Gerard Depardieu and the dashing Polish actor Daniel Olbrychski.

Mish, who hosted Vysotsky on that trip, said he served as a translator while Vysotsky pitched the screenplay to Medavoy during a dinner at the seafood restaurant Gladstones, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He recalled Vysotsky "animatedly discussing the plot of his film, and he would take pauses for me to translate."

Mish said he also helped Vysotsky pitch the script by telephone to Buck Henry, who was

nominated for an Oscar for his adapted screenplay for the 1968 film "The Graduate" and for best director for the 1979 film "Heaven Can Wait," which starred and was co-directed by Warren Beatty.

"I remember Buck being mildly interested but noncommittal. Same with Mike Medavoy," Mish told RFE/RL.

Medavoy said he remembered that Vysotsky "pitched something, but I can't remember the specifics." Henry did not respond to e-mails seeking comment.

According to Shemyakin, Vysotsky originally intended to have the film made in France but had said that Hollywood "may be an option" as well. "Nothing came of the screenplay, though Volodya dreamed something would," Shemyakin told Tsibulsky, the Minnesota-based Vysotsky expert.

Despite Vysotsky's interest in working in Hollywood, both Mish and Finn doubted he had designs on setting up shop permanently there. Such a move, he feared, would rob him of the audience and inspiration for his music, they said.

"This is one of those important reasons why he decided in the final end not to seek asylum in the West, not to seek to immigrate [to] the West," Finn told RFE/RL. "He decided: 'No, if I go from Russia, not only will I be completely unknown thereafter, but I will also lose touch with my people. I'll lose touch with what makes me go.' He was a major patriot when it came to Russia. He would say: 'Why would I want to leave what makes me tick, what makes me alive?'"

Sobriety Lost

By the time he was pitching his movie script in Hollywood, Vysotsky had long since abandoned the sobriety that Vlady said emboldened him when he played for the stars at Medavoy's house. He had planned to fly from Los Angeles to Tahiti for the wedding of Vlady's ex-husband but was not allowed on the plane due to a visa issue. Mish said he drove Vysotsky to the airport on the day he was kept off the plane.

"That was the first time I'd ever seen Vladimir cry," Mish said, adding that Vysotsky's emotions during his stay seemed "more extreme" than usual. He suspects Vysotsky "may have just started taking drugs or something."

Vlady wrote that when she arrived in Los Angeles two weeks later, her husband was spending "entire days" recording his music in Mish's home studio. He was "not eating, not sleeping"and "talking incessantly," and only later did Vlady understand that Vysotsky was abusing drugs, she wrote.

Vysotsky was injecting morphine in the final years of his life, in part as a means of curtailing his notorious binge drinking, according to those who knew him. While touring in Soviet Uzbekistan in July 1979, he collapsed and was revived by a doctor following an incident believed to be linked to his drug use.

Vysotsky died of heart failure a year later on July 25, 1980, during the Summer Olympics

in Moscow. His premature demise at age 42 is widely attributed to the punishment he inflicted on his body with alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, as well as to the pressure-cooker existence he led under a regime suspicious of his art. With the eyes of the world on the Olympics, the Soviet government remained virtually silent about his death. Tens of thousands of admirers nonetheless flooded the streets of Moscow to mourn Vysotsky, setting up a tense standoff with police attempting to stem the unrest.

Andshel / Wikicommons

Vysotsky's grave at Vagankovskoye cemetery still all covered with flowers in 1983 — 3 years after his death.

'Hello Warren'

Six months before he visited Hollywood for the last time in December 1979 — and just over a year before he died — Vysotsky entered a television studio early in the morning at the sprawling Moscow State University campus together with his friend, Valery Yanklovich. Vysotsky wore brown trousers, a tan coat, and an orange-red collared shirt with the top three buttons unsecured. Sporting deep circles under his eyes, he perched himself on a chair in front of a video camera and stumbled through an introduction in his broken English.

"Hello, Warren, how are you?" he said. "Excuse me my English, because I never speak in English. This first much I speak. I will not speak English. I will speak Russian. Because you know, you understand Russian."

The intended recipient of the video was Warren Beatty, who was preparing to shoot the movie "Reds" based on the life of the American journalist John Reed, author of "Ten Days That Shook the World," a firsthand account of the Bolshevik Revolution. (Beatty spoke some

Russian and had conducted research for the script during a trip to the Soviet Union a decade earlier.)

Yanklovich said in a 2013 documentary aired on Russian state television that a Hollywood contact of Vysotsky's — perhaps Milos Forman or Natalie Wood — had advised him to reach out to Beatty about possibly landing a role in the film. It is unclear whether Beatty, who could not be reached for comment, ever saw the 30-minute video. Vysotsky, however, was not cast in "Reds," which was nominated for best picture and earned Beatty an Oscar for best director.

In the video letter to Beatty, Vysotsky reads poetry and delivers Hamlet's soliloquy, revising a role that earned him acclaim at Moscow's Taganka Theater.

He also plays several of his most famous songs, including the one that Finn says he performed at the Hollywood party in 1976: "Capricious Horses."

While introducing the song, Vysotsky coughs violently and explains in Russian: "It's morning here. That's why" — he points toward his tobacco-ravaged vocal cords and shakes his head — "aren't working yet." Then he begins:

"On a rugged cliff, the very edge, above the endless chasm

I keep lashing at my horses with my whip clenched in a spasm. But the air is growing thinner, I am gasping, drowning, crying.

I can sense with horrid wonder, I am vanishing, I'm dying."*

**Translations by Stanley Altshuller*

Originally published by RFE/RL.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/09/07/when-the-legendary-soviet-bard-vladimir-vysotsky-hit-hollywood-a49402