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Road Trip: Russian Fans Go With the Flow

This year's Helsinki Flow Festival was filled with young Russians

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Anna Bushmina taking a break from her "volunteer" work to enjoy the music. **Anna Bushmina / MT**

The annual Flow Festival in Helsinki is the most accessible European music festival for Russian fans. This year almost 3,000 Russians made their way north in a pilgrimage — for work, music, or experience — in a trip that turned out to be much more than music. The Moscow Times followed three Flow visitors to find out why they went and how it changed them.

The first-time fan

It's a warm Friday evening in Helsinki. We're walking down a street toward the defunct Suvilahti power plant where the Flow Festival is being held. It's a cozy old neighborhood of 2- and 3-story houses with cats resting on wooden windowsills. Heavy rain is forecast for the

evening, and the first drops start falling. The street is half-empty, but when we get closer to the festival we see crowds descending from the hill above.

Alex Davydenko has been looking forward to this trip since 2013. It all started when he read about Kendrick Lamar's show at Flow on the rap.ru website. "It's so contagious," the 26-year-old logistics specialist told The Moscow Times, "that sooner or later you want to go there yourself."

Davydenko lives in the town of Krasny Sulin near Rostov-on-Don in the south of Russia – a very long way from Helsinki. Four years ago he met two Finnish sisters in Rostov-on-Don who came to Russia as exchange students. They told him they had a tradition of buying each other tickets to Flow as birthday presents. This year he was finally able to buy a ticket and book a bed in a hostel not far from the festival grounds.

He had come to hear Kendrick Lamar, Brockhampton and Kamasi Washington – this year's saxophone sensation – but was most impressed by Patti Smith and Lauryn Hill. Smith's set had a family air about it – her son assisted her on the guitar. And he liked the monumental sound of Hill's band of ten.

Russian music is not quite ready for prime time, Davydenko thinks. "There are just a few Russian rappers that aren't embarrassing — Boulevard Depo, Scriptonite and LSP. Russian rock is stagnating and indie and pop bands are still quite local," he said.

For Davydenko, Flow was something of a surprise. "I think European festivals are different from Russian ones in spirit – they are a kingdom of freedom, the atmosphere is different, there are no limitations on opinions, styles and behavior. As a people, we are more inhibited than Europeans," Davydenko said. But he got what he wanted: to see some veteran groups and some hip new acts. He hopes to return next year, too.

The volunteer

Anna Bushmina lives in Petrozavodsk, much closer to the Finnish border. One of her friends, a great Arctic Monkeys fan, heard that the band would be playing at the Flow Festival. Bushmina looked for information about the festival online and found a call for volunteers. Organizers promised a 3-day ticket and free meals in exchange for two seven-hour shifts of work – before, during or after the event. She applied and became one of about 400 volunteers, many of them Russians from St. Petersburg and other places close to the border.

Volunteers could choose shifts installing and dismantling the stages, cleaning, decorating the premises, checking visitor bracelets at the gate and doing other kinds of jobs.

Bushmina's day started at 6:30 a.m. She cleaned Suvilahti's area and sorted garbage until 1:30 p.m. The 20-year-old philology student had to sign an agreement committing to do the job or return the money for the ticket – 215 euros. She met girls who had volunteered for the third year in a row.

"It was awesome," she said. "I got lucky with my shifts and I didn't miss a show. But there was no sleep for me," Bushmina said.

She didn’t know most of the line-up, so she didn’t have any expectations. The one group she knew, Artic Monkeys, didn’t impress her. “I wouldn't say they were very energetic. Alex Turner looked so tired, he didn't chat with the public, didn't smile. He was like ‘listen and let me go,’” she said. But she deemed the rappers Brockhampton “electric and cool” and found the young R&B diva Jorja Smith “amazing.”

In spite of having little sleep, Bushmina would like to volunteer at Flow again. It opened up a new world for her, both in music and with a new circle of friends. She stays in touch with some of them every day.

The music journalist

Kristina Sarkhanyants, a 27-year-old journalist from Moscow, writes about music for her Telegram channel and a variety of online media. She was at Flow for the third time in a row.

“The festival is quite compact. You make up a list, watch about 30 artists over the weekend and enjoy each one completely,” she told The Moscow Times. She also liked the Other Sound program, where you could hear music that was far from mainstream. And she liked the fact that the festival was close to Russia and easy to get to.

“The Finns take the organization one step forward every time. They are eco-friendly: this year there is a bottle deposit of one euro. The ground isn’t littered with plastic cups. And if you bring your empty water bottle inside, you can refill it all day long for free at special drinking water taps,” Sarkhanyants said. It was also easy to work the festival, with plenty of PR support.

The music didn’t disappoint, especially Charlotte Gainsbourg and Moses Sumney — the “revelation” and the jazz program. “You should use every chance to see Kamasi Washington live.” Patti Smith and Kendrick Lamar were simply unforgettable, but she thought Lauryn Hill didn’t pull her weight. The Russian musicians — Kedr Livansky from Moscow and DJ Lena Popova from Saint-Petersburg — were well received by the European crowd.

“Every time I leave the festival I think they can’t get any better, and I don’t think I’ll come back again. But every time they roll out a program for the next event I think – damn, I gotta be there,” Sarkhanyants said.

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