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The Russian Music Scene in 2023: From a New Wave of Emigration to Fame for Tuvan Throat Singers

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Yuri Shevchuk. A still from the music video for the new song "News." **officialddt / YouTube**

Until Feb. 24, 2022, the Russian music industry was developing at a brisk pace, using all the opportunities of international promotion and local services to build a strong foundation. It has certainly suffered in this period, but it still might be able to recover and adapt.

Spotify left Russia in 2022. YouTube Music disabled paid subscriptions for Russians and the option to monetize views and downloads. Apple Music has cut its operations in the country to a minimum, and recommendations and new releases from Russia are no longer updated.

Nevertheless, the audience has adapted to these changes rather quickly. Streaming traffic of state-backed Russian IT giants has grown significantly according to Forbes: Yandex Music by 15%, VK Music by 10% and Zvooq by 2% (formerly Sbersound and Zvooq). VK Music, which gained momentum during the pandemic, became an actively growing streaming service with its own festival.

The Big Three major labels — Warner, Universal, and Sony — have also left Russia. Various experts estimate the loss of royalty payments by performers at between 15 and 70%. After the sale of Sony's Russian catalogues to the former top managers in its Moscow office, a new label called Kiss Koala uniting the bases of Warner and Sony was registered. Another player on the label market in 2023 was MTS, which created its own streaming service and puts out releases by mid-level indie musicians.

"*The main event of 2022-23 for the Russian music industry is the war, and the consequent emigration, separation, censorship, and almost all Ukrainian artists leaving the Russian pop scene. — music critic Denis Boyarinov*"

Exodus, Freeze or Z-Turn

Since February 2022, the roster of top performers who have left the country would be the envy of any music festival. Oxxxymiron, Noize MC, Andrei Makarevich, Boris Grebenshchikov, Monetochka, Zemfira, Ilya Prusikin (Little Big), Leva B-2, Anacondaz, Faith, and Morgenshtern were all declared foreign agents by the Russian Justice Ministry for their anti-war stance and charitable international performances.

Many of those who left have more or less successfully engaged in extensive international touring in every kind of venue from small clubs to large concert halls. For many young performers, before 2022 this kind of international tour was only something to dream about.

DDT's Yuri Shevchuk became the prime example of a musician remaining in the country who did not hide his position. In July 2022 he said that DDT concerts were "banned" after an administrative case was brought against him for discrediting the Russian army and a 50,000 ruble fine. Shevchuk suffered a heart attack in September 2023 and is now undergoing rehabilitation. DDT concerts in Tel Aviv, Belgrade, Limassol and Dubai have been postponed, but no new dates have yet been announced.

On the other side of the spectrum are performers who have actively or involuntarily joined in the aggressive pro-war state rhetoric, and participate in state gatherings and festivities, TV concerts and touring projects under the sign of the letter Z. The most famous of these is Shaman, who has risen as Russia's young propaganda star with catchy tunes and simple messages.

Meduza music critics have noted a striking change in the Russian pop scene in 2023: the return of chanson aesthetics in the hit parades. Oddly enough, this comes primarily from rap. "Chanson-rap: Antirespect, StaFFord63, TRUEten, Gio Pica and other artists, take themes typical for chanson of the 1990s and oughts, but wrap them in modern arrangements with new rhythms," writes Meduza. Morgenshtern, who left Russia but has not lost his flair for trends, has released a clip called "Black Russian," in which he dreams of returning to his home country in a new role as a chanson singer under the pseudonym Tagirych. The clip was a hit on Russian-language YouTube.

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A sharp turn to the right

"Young musicians with a large fan base — opinion leaders — scare the state," says music critic Denis Boyarinov, "because it has absolutely no control over them."

Gleb Lisichkin, founder of music publishing and artist-services company Horizont Label Group, told The Moscow Times that the situation in Russia is becoming more highly regulated: "Everyone is giving a salute and not making any statements. There are no options for interpretation or appeal. LGBT is extremism. Gay clubs closed overnight. Battle rappers have been criminally prosecuted and channels with rap-battles are hiding videos or have shut down completely."

There is now a fairly effective instrument of intimidation and regulation of the youth music scene, especially in rap music. State-affiliated public organizations and individuals write letters to the prosecutor's office, the behavior and public statements of musicians are closely monitored, lyrics are censored, and the genre of "public repentance and apology" has been introduced.

Yekaterina Mizulina, who in 2017 was appointed director of the Safe Internet League, an association of internet industry market participants, has become the Russian music scene's morality policeman. She accused rapper Morgenshtern of receiving foreign funding and "files" specifying the topics to be covered in his songs, sparking a media scandal that forced the singer the leave Russia. In May 2023, young musicians Hofmannita, Instasamka and Scally Milano promised to "remove tracks containing dangerous information" after a meeting with Mizulina.

Following the lead of A-bloggers, on December 22 Mizulina called for a boycott "at the state level" and a ban on the organizers and guests of Anastasia Ivleeva's “almost naked” party from appearing as "the faces of Russian social networks and state channels."

Two days later the flywheel of repression was set in motion against the organizer and guests, with fines, lawsuits, detention, tax audits, canceled concerts and television gigs, and public apologies that are painful to watch.

World music from Russia

Music critic Boris Barabanov’s pick for the best album of 2023 is “Songs and Dances of Dagestan” by the band "neeet, ty chto" (“noooo, whadyamean”) from Makhachkala, which combines jazz, funk and experimental rock with the republic’s own musical traditions. The musicians have already performed at top Moscow clubs.

In October 2023, first The Wall Street Journal and then Russian observers noticed that Apple’s iPhone 15 promotion was using a song by Tuvan singer Albert Kuvezin, leader of the Yat-Kha band. In the commercial, you can hear the band's song "Karangailyg Kara Hovaa (Dyngyldai)" (translated as "In the vast black steppe") about a running horse and a woman’s hair blowing in the wind. It was released back in 1995 on the album “Yenisei Punk.” The singer's voice is accompanied by guitars, drums, a gong and a two-stringed Tuvan instrument called the igil.

To date, the video has been viewed more than 19 million times.

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Another landmark event of the passing year was the worldwide popularity of the Tatar-language song “Pyala” by the group Aigel. It was used in the wildly popular TV series "The Boy's Word: Blood on the Asphalt" directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov. The song is in first place on the Apple Music, Yandex Music and VK Music charts, tops the Shazam world chart and recently reached the 19th spot of the TikTok Billboard Top 50.

Music critic Boris Barabanov notes: "We unfortunately often forget that Russia is a multinational and multilingual country. These are made in Russia, but not in Russian. These kinds of successes never happened before, and it’s something worth paying attention to now."

Since Russian film companies are now unable to buy the rights to foreign music, Russian-made modern and retro music is more in demand for films and movies.

Music of the 1990s made a comeback in the 2023 comedy series "Cafe Cuba" with songs by Fabrika, Chai Vdvoyem and Sektor Gaza. The film industry is also working with popular young performers to attract audiences, such as the TV series "Difficult Teenagers" featuring tracks by Grechka, Charlot, Alena Shvets, Kuoka and other artists popular with teenagers and twenty-somethings.

The long, sad Russian tradition of forced emigration

One of the most interesting projects in 2021 was an album called “Save My Speech Forever” dedicated to the 130th anniversary of Osip Mandelstam's birth. It was conceived and directed by Roman Liberov. In January 2023, he presented a music album dedicated to the centenary of Russian emigration called “After Russia,” named after Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry collection published in 1928 in Paris. The album features contemporary Russian artists who have left the country performing compositions of poems by poets of the "unnoticed generation" of the first wave of emigration. Noize MC, Monetochka, Shym (Kasta), the bands Tequilajazzz, Nogu svelo!, Naiv, Pornofilms, Sansara, AloeVera and others took part in this collection.

And in the last month of the year was another landmark release — the concert film We Exist! It was filmed in New York, Tbilisi, Paris, Berlin, Vilnius, Montenegro, Limassol, Belgrade, Lisbon, Prague, Buenos Aires, Israel and Montreal. The project featured bands already collaborating with Roman and new performers.

Liberov introduced the film with a message of defiance: "This concert film is ‘proof of life, an attempt to say to each other across borders and personal concerns, ‘We are here! We exist!’ We are disconnected and lonely, frightened and confused. We care for our children and parents, close ourselves off in our own affairs and circle of close friends. We want security and, of course, a peaceful future. This film is an attempt to set an example to unite; it’s a call to feel that we exist despite our different tastes and preferences, ages and status.”

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