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Exiled Electronic Duo AIGEL Crashes the Dancefloor With ‘Killer Qız’

By Samantha Berkhead

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Courtesy photo

It’s murder on the dancefloor.

In the propulsive opening track to exiled electronic duo AIGEL’s new album, vocalist Aigel Gaisina inhabits the role of a DJ whose beats kill a “fool old man” on the dancefloor for “drinking my people’s blood.”

“Dirty job, dirty cash, dirty stuff / Though my soul is pure,” she intones.

AIGEL’s first album in five years, “Killer Qız” is as much an account of living in exile after being forced out by an oppressive regime as it is an exploration of life, death, human nature and rebirth.

Gaisina, a poet from the republic of Tatarstan, and Ilya Baramiia, an electronic musician from St. Petersburg, rose to fame with AIGEL’s dark, hypnotic fusion of electronic and hip-hop.

Songs like “Tatarin,” “You're Born” and “Piyala” racked up millions of streams, and the band headlined festivals and appeared on major Russian late-night shows.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the duo continued to perform in Russia and speak out against the war. But even that became impossible after they were placed on a government blacklist, and they left the country with their families later that year.

What followed was a creative drought in which the idea of making music felt “meaningless” and even “offensive” given what was happening in Ukraine, Gaisina told The Moscow Times.

“I kept telling Aigel, ‘Do not push, relax, do nothing, take your time — it’ll return’,” Baramiia said.

Gradually, it did return, with music itself having a healing effect.

“Time has passed; a lot has been rethought and re-evaluated,” Gaisina said. “I am in therapy and still observing how much I’m changing as a person. I still do not trust words, but writing music gives me a kind of catharsis.”

Despite living far apart — Baramiia in Montenegro and Gaisina in Berlin — the pair have continued to collaborate remotely, just as they have since forming AIGEL in 2016. While writing “Killer Qız,” they met in Montenegro for joint recording sessions.

“Ilya connected synthesizers for me, and I improvised playing melodic lines into our drafts nonstop,” Gaisina said. “For me, these are moments of pure happiness, as well as making melodies from fragmented vocals, which I always loved to destroy. Maybe that became my passion after the war started: defragmenting all these useless words into music, which still seems to be able to heal.”

Musically, “Killer Qız” departs from AIGEL’s hip-hop-infused sound, leaning instead into electronic, rave and techno. Baramiia cites Skrillex, Diplo, M.I.A., Baauer and Dom Dolla as influences.

“We wanted to produce a dancefloor-oriented album,” Baramiia said.

The album is also AIGEL’s second written in Tatar, Gaisina’s native language, and comes as Tatar language and culture are being gradually erased in Russia. Over the past decade, the number of Tatar speakers has declined by 1 million, in part due to the abolition of compulsory Tatar-language education.

“I am worried about the fate of Tatar culture, because I feel that with its dissolution, a huge part of me is dissolving,” Gaisina said.

However, the band does not write and perform in Tatar from an activist mindset, and they continue to write in Russian and other languages.

“I think that writing songs with a purpose is a road to nowhere. A song is a soul, a mood,” Gaisina said. “We know that our Tatar album is useful, as is any content in a native language, but we do not want to become missionaries of the language specifically. Naturalness is very important to us.”

Instead, Tatar is used as one medium of many in AIGEL's diverse artistic palette, allowing them to express thoughts and emotions in different ways than Russian allows.

"The Tatar musical poetic heritage is much more traditional [than Russian]," Gaisina said. "There are fewer examples in history when ... new authors begin to write fundamentally differently, founding new genres, making a literary revolution."

"All this gives a feeling of a certain kind of virginity of the Tatar literary and musical tradition, the opportunity and desire to write in it more easily and to return meaning to simple words that in Russian would sound like hackneyed cliches," she said.

In late 2023, AIGEL's Tatar-language song "Piyala" went viral after it was featured on "The Boy's Word (Slovo Patsana)," a gritty TV drama about the gang culture of Kazan in the 1990s. But because the band is banned in Russia, its name was not included in the show's credits.

"Propaganda media and bloggers loudly celebrated the song's triumph on the international charts as some kind of symbolic victory for Russia and Russian culture, despite the fact that the song was in the Tatar language," Gaisina said. "At the same time, of course, they actively accused us of betrayal."

And in early 2024, the song appeared in a propaganda video promoting the presidential election that saw Vladimir Putin re-elected for a fifth term.

"It was absurd and surreal," Baramiia said.

Ironically, the authorities' co-opting of "Piyala" brought AIGEL's banned music to millions of new listeners in Russia. Still, the duo doubts that their anti-war stance changed many minds.

"I do not think that this influenced the beliefs of those who believe in the expediency of war, but for those who are against war, any statement against it spoken out loud is a huge support, an opportunity to feel like you have not gone crazy," Gaisina said.

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The present-day situation in Russia and the exile experience run like a red thread through "Killer Qız."

"To be still and quiet / In our homeland that's the key to survival," Gaisina says on "Eine Menge (A Lot)," the album's penultimate track and the band's first written in German. "Yes, we are here alone / All our relatives are digging trenches in foreign soil."

On "Barısı da bezdä (All we need is with us)," the killer DJ and her boyfriend board a plane out of Russia, seen off by a gaggle of government officials, police, Roskomnadzor agents, pro-war pop stars and "armchair warriors." As the plane takes off, a major, a security guard and a military correspondent cling to the wing of the plane.

"Mom, why do we need a new home? ... We're not staying here forever, are we?" a child's

voice asks on "Assimilation," a track about how adapting to a new country can come at the expense of one's own culture.

"I forget words in Tatar, and when I forget, I start saying them in German," the child says.

Yet there are also more universal themes expressed through Gaisina's poetic, symbolic lyrics.

On "Qupşıl (Goldfinch)," the song's narrator looks at a singing bird and wonders if it, too, laughs and cries like humans do, in a poignant statement about trying on someone else's pain.

"We want everyone to find something of their own in our music," Gaisina said. "It is very diverse and our listeners, even Russian- and Tatar-speaking, are very different."

"What is a real home? The place where you were born, or where you were buried?" Gaisina contemplates in German on "Eine Menge."

For Gaisina and Baramiia, the answer may be neither.

"Over the years of strengthening authoritarianism, I have become much more alien and out of place in my country than here in Europe," Gaisina said. "That is why I left and why I feel at home in Berlin, where law, justice, dignity, rights and freedoms of the individual are indisputable values."

Thanks to the Russian, Tatar, Ukrainian and Belarusian communities in Berlin — as well as the internet — Gaisina said she does not "feel a dramatic break [or] thinning of the threads that connect me with the place where I was born."

"When I'm returning from tours — Podgorica airport, the mountains of Montenegro — I'm saying to myself, 'I'm home.' And I feel very happy," Baramiia said.

"But at the same time, I understand that I have no home as it was," he continued. "That's okay with me. Home is where my family is."

AIGEL is touring Europe in support of "Killer Qız" and will perform at P60 in Amsterdam on Wednesday. Tickets are available here.

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