

Belorussia, amid the ruins of war and the hunger of the late forties, little boys with no access to the media would devour the Johnny Weismuller Tarzan movies brought to their village on horse carts and shown outdoors. Tarzan, Jane, and Boy were a "holy family" to one of them who recollected decades later how the myth of Tarzan seemed so much more genuine to his generation of youngsters than did the distant myth of Stalin because Tarzan represented a retreat from technological civilization.⁵

The gangster-cowboy genre appealed mainly to boys and the musicals to both sexes. The most influential American film was *Sun Valley Serenade* (1941) which arrived in Russia in 1944. A skiing idyll featuring the ice-skater Sonja Henie and the Glenn Miller orchestra playing "Chattanooga Choo-choo," it gave a boost to the popularity of American big band jazz and swing already fueled by the illegal import and black-market distribution of American recordings. While Aksenov was studying in Moscow in 1952 – the year before Stalin died – he attended a party of gilded youth who owned a "radiola" with stacked records of Bing Crosby, Nat Cole, Peggy Lee, Louis Armstrong, and Woody Herman. He watched astonished as the young guests did the jitterbug, smoked Camels and Pall Malls, addressed each other as "darling" and "baby," and identified themselves as *shtatniki* (Americans). All of this in the midst of one of the greatest cultural freezes of modern times at the very center of a totalitarian state! American jazz sounds were a bonding force for Aksenov and a whole generation that was looking forward and outward to new modes of personal expression.⁶

A time for youth

The *stilyagi*, with their tight suits and short skirts, were as much a part of the 1950s thaw generation as was the cultural intelligentsia. The sharp anti-*stilyagi* media campaign sometimes flowed over into an assault on the younger generation – even though most of that generation were not *stilyagi*. But a cluster of new writers approached "youth" with a different temper. Vasily Aksënov (1932–), one of the most famous of them, was a bridge between the literary conscience and the surging wave of disaffected youth. His childhood had been scarred during the great purges by the long imprisonment of his parents, but he was morally unscathed and shared the yearnings of his Moscow contemporaries for honesty and truth and for real art. Although a man of high culture, Aksenov was a jazz lover and he fed into the popular

culture by depicting real people of his alienated generation who scorned ideology, possessed no heroes, and sought something like the jazz, sex, and open road of the American beatniks. In the author's unforgettable metaphor, they gazed out through a nocturnal urban frame at a "starry ticket" into another world and another future. Aksenov's use of off-color urban slang lent authenticity to his work.

Reading Aksenov's ironic contrast between the official and the self images of youth in *Starry Ticket* (1961), one can appreciate the almost permanent mutual alienation. At an "evening party for young people" in the novel, its adult organizers offer an "open talk about personal matters," a documentary film on oral bacteria, and dancing to accordion music. Against this, the young characters denigrate school, imitate Lolita Torres (a popular Argentine singer of the time), and display their preference for loud rock and roll over the folk song "Rowenberry" ("Ryabinushka"). These decent and loyal youngsters are tired of *kvass* patriotism, official bombast, and village-style surveillance by the neighbors of their clothing, their morals, and their leisure habits. As Aksenov explained later, they wanted to head westward to the beaches and not eastward to the construction sites, a brilliantly terse summary of what had transpired between youth and the state since the singing, smiling, and building days of the 1930s. Aksenov was bitterly attacked in the press for the clarity of his revelations which were seen as a corrupting influence. He was only one among several writers who sought the meaning of youth rebellion of the time.⁷

Although socialist realism continued to dominate the literary scene, the great generation of 1960 – Aksenov, the poets Evgeny Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Bella Akhmadulina, Robert Rozhdestvensky, the poet and singer Bulat Okudzhava, and the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, born in the mid 1920s to early 1930s – tried to set a new tone not only in high culture but for popular culture to a large degree. Young poets became idols of open-air poetry readings, a genre of mass entertainment from the 1920s revived in 1956 with the founding of poetry days that could fill Moscow stadium with ten to fifteen thousand listeners. Mass declamation of poetry was such a familiar part of the cityscape that film director Vladimir Menshov, in recreating the ambience of youth for his movie *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, filmed Andrei Voznesensky reciting *Antiworlds* on Mayakovsky Square in the late 1950s.

The literature of conscience – Nekrasov, Dudintsev, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, and others – rose up to challenge the falsities of socialist realism in the Khrushchev period and conservatives lashed back at

them. Their battle is the best-known leitmotif in the literary history of the time. But the popular genres of detective, adventure, and science fiction, revived in the fifties, took largely a middle ground in which "modernization" was always controlled by a Soviet morality. Two writers from the journal *Youth* illustrate this trend. Arkady Adamov (1920–) inspired by the police novels of Yury German, published in its pages in 1955 *The Case of the Speckled Gang*, a detective and spy tale which offered plenty of entertainment for mass audiences through crime plot and narrative action. Its police hero possessed a high level of civility and morality, Soviet virtues that were set against the primitive or "dark" culture of the underworld and the decadent culture of "westernized" villains. In trying to reach youth through a popular medium and move beyond the canon of non-conflict, Adamov could do no more than trace the source of evil and "low culture" to remnants of NEP and to the influence of speculators and foreign powers. But the very appearance of the genre helped stir a whole new debate about the nature of social problems.⁸

Another member of the *Youth* magazine circle was Yulian Semenov (1931–), destined to become the major writer of Soviet detective novels and thrillers. His first success was *In the Performance of Duty* (1962), an arctic aviation thriller complete with propeller planes, ice flows, and ever lurking danger. Here is the earliest display of Semenov's genius at achieving success and popularity by "having it both ways," by synthesizing old and new – the Soviet and the not so Soviet. The tale is strongly reminiscent of the polar adventures of the 1930s, but the pilot hero is the son of a victim wrongly executed in the Stalinist purges. Alongside "Internationale," Mark Bernes, and "Rowenberry" we hear Lolita Torres and the thump of jazz in a restaurant – almost exactly the same musical components that were at war in Aksenov's *Starry Ticket*. In the conversations about the two (often overlapping) kinds of "westernized" youth, black market dealers (*fartsovshchiki*) are clearly denounced as aliens but the *stilyagi* are treated with sympathy and tolerance. The arctic team contains three Russians, an Armenian, and a Jew – all individualized, all equally sympathetic. The last is even permitted to sing the Shlomo Mikhoels Yiddish lullaby that had just been restored to the footage of *Circus* (Semenov is partly Jewish). Cautious references to sex, the film world, foreign travel, and elite life are mingled with patriotic memories of the war, Soviet official morality, high culture, and a classic mentor-disciple relationship.⁹

The arctic romance no longer beckoned youth as it had in the 1930s

and the rickety ski-planes could not vie with the interstellar ships that now began to soar through light fiction. In 1957 Soviet youths were enraptured by the Sputnik launch and the publication of *The Andromeda Nebula* by Academician Ivan Efremov (1907–1972), a landmark in the history of Soviet science fiction. Efremov had been a seaman, a geologist, and a paleontologist, one of the first to reconnoiter the Soviet Far East for construction projects in the 1930s. In the forties he began writing science adventure tales modeled on Jules Verne and in the 1950s added technology. *Andromeda* was the first communist Utopia since the period of revolutionary speculation into the future, a theme not permitted in the Stalin era. The sprawling but well-written story embraces the cosmos, the world of technological fantasy, humane characters, and human dilemmas. Efremov projected a global victory of communism over capitalism and the merger of all races into a beauteous humanity living free of conflict or conquest: "a unified, affluent, humanist, classless, and state-less world." He also offered harsh critiques of Stalin and Stalinism, for which *Andromeda* was attacked by hard liners. But it was published, eventually in dozens of editions and many languages and, while summarizing the destalinized ideology of the Khrushchev period, was extremely popular.¹⁰

The success of *Andromeda* and the readers' thirst that made it successful – springing in part from the postwar surge in technical education – unleashed a flood of science fiction books with print runs in the hundreds of thousands. Scientists with imaginative minds lent their technical know-how to the genre. Science and engineering students devoured it with a thirst made sharper by the new military technology, freer scientific inquiry in the mid 1950s, and the space sagas of the time, especially Sputnik and the 1961 Gagarin flight. Foreign science fiction made its way rapidly into this burgeoning market and the translated works of Asimov, Heinlein, and Bradbury took their place beside the old favorite classics of Wells and Verne. Science fiction lifted readers out of the everyday into another time and space and provided adventure, suspense, and puzzling situations. It took standard jabs at capitalism. But unlike the detective genre, science fiction sometimes fashioned scenarios that were anti-Western in form but which could be interpreted as critiques of Soviet society and policy. The built-in obsession with the frontiers of science and with rapid technological advances excited its main audience: young urban males, especially those with aspirations for a scientific or technical career.¹¹

Singing a new tune

The atmosphere of relative freedom, euphoria, and pluralism was reflected in popular music; for one thing, more songs were written because – as in filmmaking – creators were less afraid of unexpected political consequences. The “mass song” however, with its patina of *kazennaya kultura* or official optimistic gloss, continued to thrive on state subsidy and favoritism: Khrushchev for example commissioned the Pokrass brothers to write a song about Moscow with words by Lebedev-Kumach; and when the leader admitted in public his fondness for a Ukrainian folk song, it was played ten times on the radio that day.¹² Mass song was also promoted by professional song writers who made good money cranking it out. Songs like Evtushenko’s “Do the Russians Want War?” (music by Kolmanovsky, 1961), with its folklore, birches, plowed fields, and political rhetoric may seem irrelevant to Westerners. And “Let There Be Sunshine” (Alexander Ostrovsky/Lev Oshanin, 1962) may sound utterly banal:

Let the sun shine forever,
Let the sky always be,
Let there always be mama
Let there always be me.

The hymn “We, Communists” (Tulikov/Gradov, 1958) is all military bluster, but it hardly differs from the patriotic songs of England or America. “I Love You Life” (Kolmanovsky/Vanshenkin, 1956) is certainly “priggish,” but sex was also almost totally absent from Anglo-Saxon popular song for two decades. And “Long Gone from the Donbass” (Bogoslovsky/Dorizo, 1956) – certainly a “grab bag” of clichés as an English critic has shown – performs the same function as the country western song that took hold in the United States at about the same time. Artistry aside, it must be said that such songs were genuinely popular. There is no question that thousands, indeed millions, sang and enjoyed them, partly because the music compensated for the banal words. On the other hand, some Soviets despised mass songs and parodied them. The lyrics “We were born to make fairytales come true” (see ch. 3) were rendered “We were born to make Kafka’s nightmare come true” in an underground version.¹³ The bard poetry movement (see p. 134) was partly a revolt against mass song.

Side by side with mass song, and often feeding on it, flourished Soviet pop – an inscrutable genre that eludes definition. A sensible way to understand it is to listen to what was for decades the most

famous and most popular Russian song: “Evenings Outside Moscow” (“Podmoskovnye vechera”; words by M. L. Matusovsky, 1956) by the prolific and skilful Vasily Solovëv-Sedoi (1907–1979), a veteran of the conservatory, radio, and wartime entertainment brigades, who began writing war songs and mass songs in the 1940s. Known in the West as “Moscow Nights” or “Midnight in Moscow” (wrongly suggesting an urban setting), “Evenings” was the first non-political Soviet song since the 1930s that made its way into Western markets. This was helped by a strikingly energetic dixieland arrangement in the late 1960s by the Englishman Kenny Ball. The banal lyrics describe a chaste and dreamy courtship on a summer night in the wooded suburbs of the capital:

Now the daybreak comes ever gradually.
So my darling please be so good,
As to keep these nights in your memory,
Summer nights in the Moscow wood.

But the elegiac music is enchanting and eminently singable. The secret of its success probably lies in the ambivalent and pleasant feelings created by words of love and hope to a melancholy minor melody. Such contrastive devices which helped American popular composers like Irving Berlin (as in “Always”) to world prominence were readily employed by Russian songwriters. “Evenings” endures in the Soviet consciousness as the hourly musical signal of Radio Moscow (replacing Dunaevsky’s “Song of the Motherland” in 1956). This obscure and seemingly trivial change of songs also signaled a shift in national and official mood – from the sunny urban optimism of the 1930s to a more tranquil and nostalgic celebration of rural life; as such it was a landmark in the depoliticization of popular song.¹⁴

Younger songwriters – Oskar Feltsman (1921–), Venyamin Basner (1925–), Alexandra Pakhmutova (1929–), and others – brought in new styles; and singers such as Muslim Magomaev and Edita Pekha emerged alongside older stars like Mark Bernes to popularize both foreign and Soviet pop songs. In most of the upbeat songs banality ruled supreme, both in melody and words. Kolya Vasin (1945–), a future rock man, recalls the nausea he felt on hearing pop songs like “Misha, Misha, Where’s Your Smile?” Yet these songs and big band music were sung and danced to by several generations. The continuing urbanization, the appearance of new restaurants, a relative upgrading in affluence, an upswing in radio listening, and the greater availability of recordings spurred the composition of Soviet pop; and the softening of relations with America and Europe brought in a flood

of Western songs. Two of the vocal stars of the late 1950s were the Italian teenager with a falsetto voice, Robertino Loretto, and the Argentinean Lolita Torres.¹⁵

Although the severe late Stalinist bans were lifted, jazz was still seen by many critics as an alien art and it continued to fight for a place in the galaxy of popular music and public performance – not to mention recording and radio programming. The smooth *estrada* jazz was ever present on bandstands and in restaurants. It was the music of the jitterbugs and *stilyagi* and of hundreds of thousands of youngsters who tuned in to the jazz programs of Willis Conover on Voice of America starting in 1955. Dixieland groups, combos, and jazz clubs proliferated in Soviet towns where couples danced at parties to the strains of Peggy Lee and Duke Ellington. The evening of jazz became, in the words of Frederick Starr, “a community rite of the younger generation.” But officials were still ambivalent. In Kiev a “citizens” movement protested the outpouring of “trash” by the Melodia record company. Khrushchev had his own particular notions about jazz: “When I hear jazz,” he said at the 1962 Manège exhibition, “it’s as if I had gas on the stomach. I used to think it was static when I heard it on the radio ... Or take these new dances which are so fashionable now ... You wiggle a certain section of the anatomy ... it’s indecent.” In his last years, clubs were closed and the silly Komsomol patrols again began to prowl. The arch-enemy of jazz and rock, Leonid Ilychev, a major party functionary of *agitprop* and ideology, spoke of the “yowling” of foreign bands. Cultural conservatives tended to conflate jazz and rock the way political ones conflate liberalism and radicalism.¹⁶

Soviet people first began hearing rock and roll in the 1950s over Voice of America. This generated an industry of smuggled records and homemade recordings done on X-ray plates and a large underground market that was linked by the accusing authorities to the underworld of violent crime. At the 1957 World Youth Festival – a great turning point in cultural history – foreign rock was played alongside jazz. Soviet youngsters, like those all over Europe, began bidding each other farewell with the words “See ya later alligator” (from the Bill Haley song). “Love Potion Number 9” and “Tutti Frutti, Well All Rooty” were blasting out in Soviet apartments, recorded or played live by enthusiasts. At some point around 1960, those in the subculture of young urbanites attuned to Western styles divided into *shtatniki* (“Americans” who adhered to the zoot suit and big band) and *bitniki* (proto-hippies in jeans and sweaters who preferred “beat” or rock

music). In a few years, “Beatlemania” would drown out the differences. The new musical beat once again transformed dance styles. The durability of the folk dance, foxtrot, waltz, and tango which coexisted freely with the jitterbug or boogie – when not persecuted – made Soviet dance floors into museums of dance history. When the twist arrived in the sixties, the sight of Soviet couples gyrating with fists and knees jutting out in different directions to Chubby Checker tunes dismayed the guardians of culture and morality, including the old-time steppers who shared the dance floor with them.¹⁷

But what did they do about it? Shostakovich spoke angrily of its “alien primitivism” and ex-foreign minister Shepilov echoed him at a congress of composers in 1957. Jazz groups, aware of rock’s attraction, employed the false parody, pretending to make fun of rock as they played it to loving audiences. Moiseev did the same thing in a number called “Back to Monkeys” at Moscow’s sober Chaikovsky Concert Hall; again, audiences loved what they were supposed to laugh at. In response to the menace of rock and roll and to the complaints of Soviet composers who were losing royalties, Kiev Komsomol patrols in 1960 were trained to distinguish between acceptable popular music and *bugi-vugi*. They “infiltrated” restaurants and youth hangouts, boogied with the rest, kept lists of the unacceptable songs, and confronted the musicians with their evidence. As a result of this piece of espionage, swing and rock-type bands were replaced by folk ensembles throughout the city.¹⁸

On a visit to Tashkent in 1956, an American journalist saw *stilyagi* dancing to “Stompin’ at the Savoy” played by a loud combo. An indignant MVD (security police) officer spoke out: “All this energy could be invested in building a hydro-electric power station, rather than wasted here on a dance floor.” This mood was translated into policy. As an antidote to boogie-woogie and jitterbug, the Komsomol in 1961 endorsed the “Lipsi,” a fast waltz invented in East Germany to rival the decadent Western dances. In the spring, a conference on ballroom dancing was convened to discuss what was acceptable on the dance floor. It approved invented dances such as “The Walk,” “The Russian Lyrical,” and “Friendship” which sought to combine rhythmic energy with respectable deportment. Igor Moiseev, the great impresario of ensemble dancing, tried to eliminate Western vulgarity from Soviet dance floors by designing popular and dynamic dances rooted in tradition. For two years, the press and television promoted Moiseev’s new dances – “Moscow Girl,” “Russian patterns,” “Herringbone,” and many others. The steps were imaginative, but young

people, in spite of Komsomol efforts at promotion, ignored them and danced the way they wanted. This foolish exercise in socialist choreography for the masses was never really forced on dancers, and was a complete failure. While the Moiseev troupe was selling Russian "folk" to American audiences as part of its country's cultural diplomacy, urban Soviets, old and young, twisted and boogied their way through the 1960s.¹⁹

A genuinely new music genre that swelled into a mass movement in these years was guitar poetry or "composer's song," words and music written and performed by the artist. Rooted in previous decades and preceded by a wave of camp songs brought back to the cities by victims of Stalin's gulag released by the new regime, it was heard publicly only in the 1950s. Like underground poems, songs, and jokes, guitar poetry was part of the antidote to official culture. Its chief pioneers were Alexander Galich (see ch. 6) and Bulat Okudzhava. Okudzhava (1924–; see fig. 18) was, like his friend Aksënov, a child of the purges, having lost his father in the 1930s. Both a poet and a novelist, Okudzhava imprinted his art on an entire generation with his incomparable guitar songs. He began writing them in 1956 and became a genuine cult figure among students and the urban intelligentsia. His cult reached an even wider audience since much of his work was known from unofficially produced and circulated tapes, particularly of the unpublished songs. This mode of cultural dispersion, called *magnitizdat* or "tape recorder publishing," was the major vehicle for the popularity of Galich, Okudzhava, and later Vysotsky. Okudzhava became a veritable challenge to the official Soviet pop music industry in the early 1960s through recordings, film music, and public performances.

Okudzhava spun the theme of loneliness, loss, despair, and nostalgia, made cryptic references to the terror, and displayed mystical attachment to the old Arbat district in Moscow. His exaltation of the spiritual strength of women ("Your Majesty, Woman") has sources in nineteenth-century Russian literature. His honest songs about World War II, in which he fought, contrast vividly to those of official patriotism. His performance style, a simple and modest demeanor, was a refreshing contrast to the declamatory mode of Soviet popular and mass song artists. His lyrics were poetic and personal, tragic or comic, but always authentic. Places, times, loves, and moods come alive in the realia of his verses about the Arbat, the last trolleybus, an old jacket, or the Smolensk Road. But the lyrics alone, as spoken poetry, could never replicate the response that this artist evoked with his music.

"Georgian Song" (Okudzhava is half-Georgian by birth) and the "Prayer of Francois Villon" are among the most beautiful and singable melodies in all of Russian music.

Okudzhava's art has been called "the folklore of the urban intelligentsia," particularly the generation born between 1930 and 1950. Okudzhava's music still serves as the nostalgic "sound track" for those who were young in the late fifties; one of his songs was used exactly this way in the film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980) and in a documentary on the fate of Soviet art, *Black Square* (1987). Vladimir Frumkin recalls how, as a young communist believer and an enthusiast for the songs of Dunaevsky and Blanter, he and many of his generation were converted to artistic and emotional truth on hearing Okudzhava sing of a nocturnal ride of pain and despair through the city on a trolleybus, by the reference to "my religion" in "Old Arbat," and by the simple tale of an "Old Jacket" which gets repaired while the owner's life is still in tatters – all of which evoked feelings that were simply unknown in official culture. "Old Jacket," much to the disgust of Okudzhava's admirers, was set to a banal melody by Blanter and sung by the pop and mass singer, Eduard Khil, in a masterpiece of perverted bombast which lost every trace of the original.²⁰

Under the impact of these voices expressing new sensibilities, Soviet youth began forming guitar song groups that congregated out of doors and in people's flats. Their songs and those of the camps – especially among the intelligentsia – offered a new musical mood that differed from what was heard on radio and cut on records. Once banned emigré singers, like Alexander Vertinsky, who had returned to the Soviet Union during the war, were given wide publicity through recordings, appearances, and film.

The crocodile's teeth

In March 1963, Nikita Khrushchev pronounced the following words at a gathering of art and literature figures:

Satire is like the surgeon's scalpel: you find harmful growths inside a human body and like a good surgeon you remove them right away. But to know how to wield the weapon of satire skillfully the way the surgeon uses his knife, to remove the deadly growth without harming the organism – that requires mastery.

This pithy comment sums up almost the entire political history of Soviet satire. The healthy organism is state, party, and Soviet values;