

When I received a note from Sulakauri Publishing, the first thing that caught my eye was a book by Bidzina Makashvili. His name for me is forever associated with dependable coverage of our favorite artists and the contemporary music scene as it is, too, for my generation of melomaniacs, and the one before that. So naturally I laid hands on the book as fast as I could. There was something nostalgic in the anticipation of reading it, just like meeting an old friend.

Even if you knew nothing of the author, the title of the book alone tells you that you are dealing with a true craftsman, armed with both excellent metaphors and good humor. It is a testament to Makashvili's exceptional talent that his book reads at once like an encyclopedia, a memoir, and a fine novel wrapped in one.

But what is this book about? I don't like these questions but they are bound to crop up. And since it is the purpose of this review to excite your interest, I'd say that this book is about Georgian (and not merely Georgian) rock, and (not merely rock) music's most interesting reversals of fortune.

Bidzina Makashvili begins his narrative with 60's Georgia, when he was a little boy and had not the faintest inkling of his future as Georgia's foremost rock critic. The country was buried under totalitarianism; the author's experiences reveal truths about the Soviet regime that have gained an almost legendary status. They are things that seem quite unbelievable in the 21st century, in the age of the internet and social media, where the endless torrent of information has become an opposite problem.

It is hard to imagine that the Beatles were banned in the Soviet Union; and when the sole record label, "Melodiya", managed to sneak the Fab Four's hit into the foreign collection they did so by crediting the Lennon-McCartney composition, "Girl", as a folk tune.

It is indeed hard to imagine that the first spark of cultural resistance would be kindled elsewhere and by people other than musicians. It was through music that the totalitarian system first cracked. Rock music in that epoch was not simply a mere form of entertainment; it was, for all intents and purposes, a liberating cultural force.

It is all the more strange that there was no single voice narrating the revolution. The public was accustomed to Soviet sterility. Journalism either hid behind fake academicism or degenerated into the vulgar. It was in this desolate landscape that Makashvili's articles began circulating in which he struck a balance between plain speech and academic rigidity. He spoke to you through his content, not by using a flood of difficult words or dissident vulgarity.

Bidzina's style was different, natural, effortless, jocular. His penetrating insights went far beyond the boundaries of criticism. His articles were read even by those who did not necessarily take an interest in music.

In this book, you will read about the rise and fall of some Georgian musicians and the zenith of others. Irakli Charkviani, Lado Burduli, Bakur Burduli, Niaz Diasamidze, Robi Kukhianidze, and bands such as

“Outsider”, “Vakis Parki”, “Blues Mobile”, “Modern Blues Band” are but a few of the names discussed in the book.

This book is indeed encyclopedic; its main achievement is its vast worldview. The author analyzes the local music scene, but not in isolation, as though the wider world did not exist, but as an organic part of ever-growing, ever-changing currents, thus giving them global significance.

Finally, this book contains what is, in my view, Makashvili’s Magnum Opus. It’s an article which is in truth more akin to a prime work of fiction. I have in mind the author’s account of a two and a half minute encounter with Paul McCartney. I will not spoil the pleasure of your reading it. It is the prose of the highest order.

On the back cover, the book has a QR code which, if scanned, leads you to a YouTube playlist where you can enjoy the songs in question. This book does not merely retell events, it helps build participates the cultural foundation on which contemporary Georgian music still stands; this is a story every Georgian should know.

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