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Joyful Music in Sorrowful Times

or the Blues by the River Mtkvari

Rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing
people who can't talk for people who can't read.

Frank Zappa

Preface

Several reasons determined my desire to write what you are about to read. Those reasons stemmed from time. And Time is something that doesn't ask you anything, it lays down its own conditions and regulates your life.

Firstly, there is the time that has elapsed since I was born that determined my wish to share with the others what awaits you ahead. Also, with time, I have accumulated several typical questions I was often asked, so I will try to answer them as best I can. And finally, all the stories told in the book present a condensed history of how I attempted to promote popular culture in the Georgian independent media of recent years. Like my other ideas, this one could have remained unfulfilled if not for a technical factor: with time it became increasingly impossible to use the archive of my publications for further work. I got to the point where I was obliged to

transfer the yellowing newspaper cuttings of the 1990s kept in my desk drawers, the originals of which were written in pen, onto Word files. It was time to put them together with my 'younger' publications typed on a computer keyboard.

Sadly, in the process I discovered that many articles that had positively presented my image of those distant years seriously clashed with my taste of today. Moreover, my daughter got interested in those publications, wondering how their author could have been an expert on such a marvellous thing as rock. Which reminds me of Ringo Starr.

The musician was extremely annoyed that he, a 23-old young man, was asked to comment on global issues and mankind's problems, happiness and the absolute truth, the essence of monarchy and the political system of his country. 'You're uneducated, the only thing you can do is hit the drums a bit better than someone else', the wise Ringo said. He was uneducated before he joined the Beatles and remained so later too. It's life itself that is the greatest enlightener.

Most probably you have already guessed what to expect from this book of undetermined genre. But if you haven't, I'll add something else: once, having found out that I have a degree in physics, a young journalist asked in bewilderment what I did at the Physics Department of the university. I answered - the same as Jack Nicholson did in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. However, her question set me thinking: What had defined my decision to devote myself to the media and the fact that I enjoyed a stable job in the most interesting period that coincided with Georgia's struggle to regain its once lost sovereignty?

It's for a good reason I was reminded of Ringo Starr, because it's all the fault of music, or more precisely, of rock music.

But what did I have to do with all that? Nothing in fact. Mainly because the likes of me, or those young people who showed more interest in popular music than their peers, were plenty around the world. I was just an ordinary listener. All right, a little better informed than the rest, but nothing more than that.

It all began with the Beatles, and a bit more.

Let's follow the chronology of the events.

The 1960s

I must have been 5 or 6 when I first paid attention to music. What was my musical environment? There were several sources at home: old dusty gramophone records (without the gramophone itself), the radio, TV and the Becker baby grand, tortured by my sister by obligation. None of those attracted me much. But it was TV that first caught my attention. However, it wasn't the impact of its primary function.

The thing is that in those years the Georgian television started broadcasting at six in the evening. About half an hour earlier the screen showed a regulatory grid which was accompanied by foreign songs. Obviously, nothing special, but, surprisingly, I still remember some singers: Marino Marini, George Marianovič, Radmila Karaklajič, Lili Ivanova, Karel Gott, Raphael, Mitchell, Robertino Loreti… It was my first encounter with music from abroad. Sadly, it was not particularly successful. Those professionals clearly knew their job, some of them were quite popular, even stars of the time, for instance Robertino Loreti, the wonder kid. But somehow, even then I felt all of that was the second tier, that there had to be more joyful, more real music somewhere. And that 'somewhere' primarily

was Britain, Western Europe and America. And all the while the musicians of my childhood came from the Socialist part of Europe (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia) or at best from the Mediterranean (Spain, Italy and Greece).

Some of those performers visited Tbilisi as part of their Soviet Union tours, with the concert hall usually full. I deliberately didn't include Yma Sumac, an amazing singer from Peru with an outstanding vocal skill enabling her to somehow sing in two different voices, simultaneously. I was told about her unusual talent by my mum who came across a flyer of Sumac's concert among other similar papers while tidying a desk drawer. Unfortunately, I haven't kept anything from that drawer. Many years later I was reminded of Yma Sumac by Bachi Kitiashvili, the veteran of Georgian rock, who said that he was 14 when he first saw a six-string guitar in 1960, at her concert.

Rumors and myths about the performers visiting Tbilisi were as rampant as those about real stars. For instance, apparently, George Marianovič was a drug addict. I doubt the information added any specific attraction to the singer, but I do remember I wasn't particularly impressed, thinking he was nowhere near the art of singing. The grounds for such rumors was a vivid, often unrestrained imagination of Soviet teenagers, nourished by the existing stereotypes and the singer's image: he used to take off his jacket and even lie down on the stage. As for Lili Ivanova, I liked one of her songs and only years later I realized it was *The Night Before* by the Beatles, which she sang in Bulgarian.

Very little was accessible from the truly western musical world through official channels. One of the first Americans who appeared on TV screens and records was Dean Reed. His popularity in the Soviet Union is explained by political reasons rather than his musical achievements: he couldn't stay in the US due to his anti-American activities, so he mostly lived

in Chile, where he alternately washed the American flag, lived in Eastern Germany and appeared in westerns made there or participated in protest marches.

The TV musical programmes of the time were limited to the classic and folk genres, as well as Soviet and Georgian popular music. From that period, for some reason, best of all I remember a vocal quartet Gaya from Azerbaijan and Polad Bülbüloğlu, the future Minister of Culture of that country. Among Russian performers, my memory retains the names of Joseph Kobzon, Eduard Khil and Muslim Magomaev, another Azerbaijani. A little later Lev Leshchenko became quite popular, joined by Maya Kristalinskaya and Edita Piekha, Polish by origin. Karel Gott from Czechoslovakia was a regular fixture of our TV. From Georgian singers, I clearly remember Lili Gogelia, Giuli Chokheli and Suliko Koroshinadze, as well as bands such as Dielo and Orera. Surely, in those days I failed to realize that the Georgian musical scene hardly had anyone as talented as Giuli Chokheli. Orera and Dielo were fairly popular, though the former reached the peak of its popularity a little later.

Another component of my musical environment was represented by a pile of around forty gramophone records kept in a medium-sized cupboard – those were records of Russian lyrical songs and classic opera arias. Except for two of them, they were all produced in the Soviet Union, while those two bore the emblem of the American Columbia label. Though all those records were produced at roughly the same time, they differed greatly in their look and the advantage surely lay with the American ones: the records were softer to touch, more bendable than the Soviet ones. Also, the grooves for the needle were narrower and neater, not as protruding as those on the Soviet ones. I won't say anything about the design of the labels in the centre: they were as opposed to each other as the grey, joyless Soviet Union from the bright,

diversely lively America. In short, I demonstrated a distinct sympathy for the West in this respect.

Where those gramophone records are now, I have no idea. One thing I can clearly recall is that I took some of them to the courtyard to test their aerodynamic properties together with some kids. The records flew wonderfully, but also wonderfully smashed as soon as they came into contact with the tarmac. Today I deeply regret that childish caper. And though my home is full of modern equipment for storing music and related information, the true pride of my collection are the vinyl records.

Yet another source of music at the time was the city radio network – a rather cherished apparatus, like a lovable family member. If a similar piece were to be produced now, I'd gladly get one, as an item of home decor if nothing else. Ours was hanging on the wall above the piano. I used to climb on the piano, turn the switch button and pat it when it came to life. Though I remember it so lovingly, I don't recall any song I heard on that radio. Mostly, it transmitted Georgian folk songs and radio dramas. The exact time signals had the greatest emotional impact on me: their muffled sound was followed by the anchor's words – It's 5 p.m. in 'Tbilisi. Now listen to...' and then the news read with a sad voice. Of course I never listened to the news. I was sad too but knew all too well that in about an hour after the signal my parents would be back from work. That's what I expected from the radio, but years later it played its role in my personal development.

Strange as it sounds, the only thing that annoyed me was the Becker, our baby grand, forever hopelessly out of tune. However, I loved it whenever its top was raised for cleaning purposes because the inside revealed so many thrilling details. Stroking the strings was particularly pleasing. I also liked the music rack. Once my parents decided that I should have music lessons, but met such resistance that they changed their mind. I can't say whether my

sister was more obedient or loved music more than me, but she took up piano lessons. It was exceedingly ‘pleasant’ when she practised scales and that nightmare went on for seven years. Despite my opposition to the entire thing, I was tempted to approach the keyboard, but it happened much later when I decided to play a tune of one of the popular songs, hitting the keys with one finger. It’s not interesting what the result was, but that was the only time I envied my sister.

It’s hard to say what influence that period had on me, but it’s obvious that some worthy things reached us from the free world. Otherwise I cannot explain the great impact the western music had on my childhood.

One summer the family was spending the holiday in Kiketi and that’s when together with some older boys I began listening to the VEF Spidola radio, sitting in the shade of fir trees. At the time all western radio stations were diligently stifled, but one could still listen to a couple, particularly in a place high up in the mountains and not very far from the capital. At one point we heard Chubby Checker’s *Let’s Twist Again*. Needless to say I didn’t know either the name of the song or its singer, and suspect neither did my older friends. But the effect was stunning. I was thrilled with the song though those two and a half minutes that it lasted was surely not enough to fully appreciate it. So, in a naive manner of my age, I asked if I could hear it again. Indeed, I was little but already realized that if you wished to hear something again and again, you needed to have either a record-player or a tape recorder. I didn’t have either, but felt an acute need to possess them.

The 1970s

Two notable events happened in my life at the end of the 60s. The first was of global importance, so I won't dwell on it. But when the American Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon in 1969, his one step filled me with pride for mankind like everyone else, but at the same time left me a bit sad: America became even more distant from me than ever before.

Shortly afterwards, my dad brought home a record-player and five records, all of his own accord, without any prompting on my part. By then the Soviet Union was already producing stereo equipment, but of rather poor quality. More importantly, there were no stereo records available for them. Ours was mono, quite good for its kind. As for the records, they were produced by Melodia, the only Soviet company issuing all musical products. These included foreign pop music as well, usually called Music Kaleidoscope and each comprised ten songs by different artists. One of my records had John Lennon's masterpiece *Girl*, but the label said the music and lyrics were or folk origin. I don't know how or why, but I was already aware that the authors were Lennon and McCartney, and that George Harrison and Ringo Starr were the remaining members of the Beatles. For many years that particular record was the source of my pride and I deeply regret not keeping it, at least as a museum piece.

It was still a long way till the 'real' records reached us, but a number of people who had travelled abroad was rising and, together with other things, they brought back vinyl records as well.

I got my first 'real' record from an older boy – a fantastic collection of Simon and Garfunkel. He sold it for a relatively modest price, which had its reason, something I realized slightly later. First of all, it didn't have an impressive cover and, more importantly, it wasn't electric guitar rock. Those

factors were so significant at the time that they often diminished the primary property of the record – its musical value.

The second record was of the British band the Who, amazingly invigorating music. I bought it relatively cheaply, mainly because the disc was rather scratched. My third purchase was likewise memorable, fully rendering one of the aspects of the Soviet reality of my home country. I got it from a student of the then Polytechnic Institute (now University) who needed money to take his exam: he was to pay a hundred roubles to an engineer who had promised to provide sketches and drawings necessary to pass the exam. At the time it was a common way of receiving a higher education degree. The price was astronomical – I could have got some other two for the money. A schoolboy then, I was obliged to befriend another pupil to gather the sum. He bought James Brown, while I chose Jimmy Hendrix. Hendrix was sponsored by my grandpa.

After that I had to take a pause. Mainly due to financial reasons and secondly because friends and acquaintances began bringing their records so we could listen to them together, or sometimes to borrow them from each other. Considering the deficit of musical information, it was an accepted practice, enough to make me a bit better informed than my peers, at least in my social circle.

At the time I was seriously hooked on the Beatles, with very few exceptions considering everything else as a surrogate. That conviction was shattered at the age of 16 or so. There were some lads in the neighbourhood who saw themselves as streetwise teens. Among other things, they used to bully others into giving up their records. If they had something they had never heard about, they would bring it to me for assessment, or just to find out what it was. Once they brought along a real wonder, starting with the cover and of course the music itself. All of it was unusual – the album

Aqualung by the British band Jethro Tull. I still remember how powerful the impression was. God knows how the record ended up in Tbilisi, but I know for sure that the worn-out needle of my player ruined the already rather damaged record. But there was no reason to worry because Jethro Tull became the greatest discovery in my rock music life. They didn't sound like anything I had heard before, producing music of an absolutely different quality. It can be easily imagined what inner turmoil the music attracting so much attention in Britain and America had on a teenager brought up on the Beatles. The album was exceptional in many ways: the Gothic script of the cover and the bearded homeless man, looking as though he stepped down from Dickens' books. In terms of the tune and the lyrics, the very first phrase must have forever stuck in my mind: 'Sitting on the park bench', its amazing vocals and instrumental accompaniment. The dominance of such an unusual instrument for rock as the flute was particularly impressive. It truly was great music. And that's when my belief in the insuperability of the Beatles was shattered. In short, the album made me think that there was something worthier in popular music than the Beatles. Soon my discovery was substantiated by another band: Carlos Santana and his album *Abraxas*. He surely was quite popular among connoisseurs, but reached widespread acknowledgement by the end of the 90s when he received several Grammys for the album recorded together with some pop stars.

Obviously, not only my neighbourhood acquaintances and tourists were responsible for developing my interest in this sphere. The radio, or rather a transistor receiver which appeared in our home at roughly the same time as the record player, had an important role in this respect. I wholeheartedly welcomed the new piece because the city network radio had long stopped satisfying my growing musical interest. Just like many others, I tried tuning in to the musical programmes of the western radio stations. As

opposed to the network radio, the transistor gave the possibility to listen to a variety of stations even though the Soviet ideology guardians studiously muffled them, especially two most popular stations – the BBC and Voice of America.

Gradually, the Georgian Philharmonic diversified its repertoire. Bands such as Orera and Dielo were joined by Iveria and then '75. Iveria can be best described as a pop-rock band. We were absolutely thrilled by their rendition of Uriah Heep's *July Morning*. Nobody could have dreamed then that nearly 40 years later Uriah Heep would perform on the same stage of the Tbilisi Philharmonic. Also, the Iveria band is well remembered for their musicals.

The band '75 was formed in 1975, hence its name. They mainly focused on jazz-rock and, a bit remotely, reminded one of the well-known Russian band Arsenal, fronted by Aleksey Kozlov, an outstanding saxophonist and Muscovite dandy. While Arsenal's focus was jazz-rock fusion and improvisation, the '75 concentrated on pop songs. I can highlight another common feature: the Arsenal was one of the first bands in the USSR to perform *Jesus Christ Superstar*, while the '75 presented the first Georgian rock opera *Alternative* by Ioseb Bardanashvili.

Broadly speaking, those bands were officially approved, while the rock underground also existed in Georgia. It's hard to say whether the sound or the form had more influence, but the fact is that the elements of this culture made their way into the country at the end of the 60s. Bachi Kitiashvili was one of the first to touch electric guitar strings. The others were Valeri Kacharov, Misha Popkhadze, Dato Sulakvelidze, Dato Shushania, Vova Mogeladze, Mao (Tamaz Kapanadze), Rezo Chachkhiani, Iliko Zautashvili, Vova Goncharenko, Sasha and Gogi Gotsiridze – the first generation of Georgian rock.

Their technical equipment, instruments and the standard of performance might seem slightly inadequate today, but if not for these pioneers, rock could have remained an exotic imported product in Georgia. Though some of these musicians had songs of their own and some even sang in Georgian, it was still an imitation. On the other hand, it was unavoidable – the road had to be taken. Actually, they opposed the system in order to express themselves the way they saw fit. Apart from their performing, their outward look was so different from the Georgian reality, clashing with the general appearance, that their image of rebels was guaranteed. Obviously, no one was going to offer them central stages for their gigs, so we had to go to the clubs in the outskirts, such as Electrodepot, the 31st Factory, Isani, Lilo… Rock was played in the deep basement of the 2nd building of the State University, the Physics Club and sometimes in the Baratashvili Bridge club, headed by Gaioz Kandelaki. For us those events were far from being just concerts – those were akin to elitist or sect séances, substituting everything for the young people: drugs, sex and freedom.

To get a better picture of the atmosphere of the time, I'll revert to the musicians themselves. Bachi Kitiashvili remembers those years: 'We faced a fierce hostility. Our looks irritated everyone. The local militia inspector warned me to get a haircut and give up music because it wasn't a man's job. We were first arrested in 1966 and our hair was forcibly cut. Later those instances were quite frequent.'

Without recordings of their performances, semi-legal concerts were the only means of communicating with the society. Bachi says that those were no mere concerts, but more like a battle. 'The Communists fought the idea of a young person taking the good vibes into the street after attending such a concert. I vividly remember the entire hall being searched during the gig, including the musicians too. At a concert in Zestaponi a policeman told me it

was all my fault, that I was agitating the listeners. At another time in Tskhakaia a serious clash between the militia and the crowd was averted. The militia wanted to stop the gig, but when they realized it would lead to violence, they told us to go ahead, but play quietly.'

The same happened during their gigs in Abasha, Kobuleti, Batumi, not to mention Tbilisi, where control and restrictions were harder to impose. The other musicians tell similar stories, so I won't tire you with them, but one instance is worth remembering: Dato Shushania says that in 1973 he planned to have a rock concert in the hall of the old Film Studio. The number of people who came could have easily filled a stadium. The street was blocked and the studio director got scared that the crowd would damage the property, so the militia dispersed them.

Compared to the others, Mao was luckier in a way because he played in the band of the Polytechnic Institute (now the Technical University). The authorities of the Institute bought instruments for its bands in the Socialist countries outside the USSR. By the mid-70s the popularity of Mao's band was huge and the state security of the time kept a close eye on the lads. 'Because otherwise we were nice guys, talented and untainted, the other musicians of the Institute tolerated us. Once I was summoned to the Party Committee of the Institute and was told that my music was bourgeois, so a special commission of the State Philharmonic would decide our fate, whether we would exist or not. The commission was furious, demanding we be banned forever. Only the composer Giorgi Tsabadze supported us, even putting up a fist fight with some members of the condemning commission.'

Due to their non-yielding stance, the band Contrast was denied the possibility to perform on stage. According to the band member Iliko Zautashvili, the only person ready to support them was Gaioz Kandelaki who allowed them to perform in the Baratashvili Bridge club. However, there were

instances when the gig was cancelled under the false pretext that their equipment was ‘arrested’. He remembers that, ‘At the time, there was a general hunt for long-haired youths. Once someone sneaked up from behind and set my hair on fire with a lighter. At other times, it happened in a hotel and in the street. I was taken to the police station (called militia then) after those incidents – it all looked like a ploy to get us there.’

A similar uncompromising attitude was demonstrated by Valeri Kocharov, an outstanding figure of Georgian rock music. The members of his hard rock band Kvadrat literally shocked the conformist inhabitants of the capital. Moreover, their mug shots adorned the stands of the militia stations with the caption: ‘These are a disgrace to the city.’

Dato Sulakvelidze often played in a band that performed along with the others. He recalled that after one of the gigs in Lilo, the band was summoned to the Komsomol city committee. ‘We were told that the locals complained about us – drug addicts, users of morphine and marijuana, and anti-fascists (the latter thought to mean an extreme fascist).’

Those were the physical, psychological and ethical pressures that defined the development of Georgian rock music in the 70s. However, it’s not at all surprising because the Soviet totalitarian regime was entering the phase later dubbed the Stagnation period.

Only Bachi Kitiashvili’s Bermukha reached us from the diverse bands that performed in those years. It’s interesting to find out how many remember Valeri Kocharov’s Kvadrat and Cold Flame, or Contrast, Labyrinth or the others. I don’t even mention lesser known bands or bands without a name, but for some reason I believe that had they left behind recordings of their gigs, even amateur ones, they would have exerted a more tangible influence on the generations to come. But, on the other hand, it’s our history that exists only in such a dubious mode. The memories mustn’t be kept as

oral stories or on papyrus scrolls, which is ridiculous considering the *21st* century technologies.

Georgia wasn't alone: along with the officially approved bands, there were much more interesting and intriguing ones, unofficial so to say, thus truly rock bands. Among them, one of the most popular was Andrey Makarevich's Mashina Vremeni (the Time Machine) from Moscow, which performed melodic rock. However, as perestroika approached, the band was one of those who successfully shifted to pop rock, something that caused dissatisfaction among the staunch supporters of true rock.

There was yet another band, Aquarium, from Leningrad (today's Saint Petersburg) whose career developed in a different way, because its popularity grew immensely after Perestroika. Boris Grebenshchikov, the front man, exercises a near cult figure status in the post-Soviet area, likewise popular in today's Georgia. The Western music world got interested in his popularity among the Russian-speaking audience, so he was invited to record several English albums in Britain and the US, but they were a failure.

I would like to highlight a specific aspect of Georgian rock music: though our rock musicians had personal and quite warm contacts with those from other Soviet republics, Georgian rock developed in isolation, as a diversion from the mainstream. Despite this, in 1980, right in the middle of the Stagnation period, Tbilisi hosted the first rock festival, dubbed the Soviet Woodstock, the first of its kind in the Soviet Union. It is still considered to be the most significant event in the history of Soviet rock music. The festival was made possible thanks to the efforts of Gaioz Kandelaki, the then head of the Tbilisi Philharmonic Hall and Artemy Troitsky, a famous rock critic from Moscow. A Finnish crew made a documentary film about the festival. Alongside the bands presenting the face of the Philharmonic and various culture clubs, genuine underground musicians were allowed to perform.

The two mentioned bands participated alongside numerous rock bands that arrived from practically all parts of the Soviet Union. And both attracted genuine attention: Mashina Vremeni was the winner of the festival, which was a clear misnomer, because winning a prize at a rock festival was a complete novelty, an unheard innovation of the USSR. And all the while, Aquarium was banned by the jury from further participation due to their unsuitable, actually scandalous behaviour on the stage. On his return to Leningrad, Grebenshchikov was sacked from work, as well as from the Komsomol. Such instances clearly demonstrate the attitude of the Soviet authorities towards rock music at the time.

However, it was the period when new areas opened up for Soviet rock, for the directions it could develop in. As from the second half of the 1980s, rock music was formally allowed in the USSR. A new era was dawning.