

Genie of artistic freedom is out of the bottle in Russia

Barry Fagin

It took more than two decades and a trip across the ocean, but I had done it. I walked away from the ticket window, clutching my prize in my fist. After 25 years of waiting, I held in my hand a front row center ticket for a Yes concert, and nothing short of martial law was going to keep me away. Actually, as an American living in Russia, I probably shouldn't joke about that.

I first saw the poster a couple of weeks before, in the subway near my apartment. Yes was coming to St. Petersburg, don't miss their final world tour!

But I wasn't convinced. I had come to St. Petersburg to experience its world famous art and culture: the Kirov Ballet, opera at the Marinsky, the treasures of the Hermitage Museum. Why should I go and hear a bunch of aging rockers, who, for all I knew, would give a performance straight out of "Spinal Tap"?

I finally decided I'd go to the Ice Palace and check it out. I asked what good seats were left, and the babushka selling tickets pointed to the first row. Telling the screaming teenage Yes fan in my head to quiet down, I asked the price: 1,800 rubles, about \$60. Too expensive for most Russians, and too expensive for me as a 16-year-old growing up in the '70s, with a car to keep up and a job busing tables. But not too expensive for a 40-plus college professor on sabbatical.

The night of the concert, the lobby was packed, it was obvious that Yes was pretty popular. The concert starting time had been pushed back two hours (nothing ever starts on time here), so I passed the time checking out the souvenir stands. It turns out that classic rock is very popular here. There's even a "Classic Rock" magazine that comes out every month, published in Russian. I bought a copy and started thumbing through it, trying to understand why the bands of the '70s and '80s were such a big draw here.

That's when I noticed Mixhail, one of my students. He introduced me to his girlfriend, and the three of us wound up talking in the café while we waited for the concert to start.

He told me that when these bands were originally popular in the West, they were very dangerous to listen to, and so only now are Russians "my age" (as he so kindly put it) getting a chance to hear what serious rock sounds like. Younger Russians are also curious to hear this music.

The show itself was great. Yes played a lot of their old songs, and they rocked the house. Jon Anderson managed to thank the crowd in his fractured Russian, and they went wild. I had come to Russia looking for unique experiences, and this one certainly qualified. Where else could I have heard the lyrics to "All Good People" shouted by a screaming mob with a thick Russian accent?

The communists here (and yes, there are many) bemoan the influence of Western popular culture. They see it as a step backward, a pitiful reflection of the true greatness of classical Russian art. I believe they are wrong. The deep poetic and artistic nature of the Russian soul will not be cheapened by freedom and capitalist culture; it will be enhanced by it. The West has borrowed generously from Russia's artistic heritage (Yes used to open concerts with Stravinsky's "Firebird."). Russia should have no fear of doing the same. The popularity of Western music and groups such as Yes in Russia are just the tip of the iceberg. The genie of political and artistic freedom has been let out of the bottle, and there is no putting it back. Russia's communists may not know this, but my students do. And as the last chord of "Roundabout" faded to thunderous applause and a standing ovation, every Russian in the St. Petersburg Ice Palace knew it too.

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