

uncivil engineering

by MICHAEL R. BENSON



A POPULAR MECHANICS PERFORMANCE WITH SERGEY LETOV ON SAX, SERGEY KURYOKHIN SINGING LEAD, AND AFRIKA, LENINGRAD'S BAD BOY, ON DRUMS.

sergey kuryokhin and
his popular mechanics
give performance art
a soviet twist.

The suppression of rock just stimulates opposition and deflects youth from active participation in the building of socialism! Sociologists, psychologists, and other specialists must help youth to play the music they like! We hope that these measures will help us in building a Soviet rock that will be better than the Western one! Our rock can be competitive with capitalist musical culture!
—Komsomol official, 1986

Sitting at a kitchen table, surrounded by empty vodka bottles, Sergey Kuryokhin, Leningrad's leading keyboard player and avant-gardist, brays "haw haw haaw"—responding to the above—and then shifts into the role of upper-class British female music interviewer, asking high-pitched questions. Incoherent, plausible words pour out of his mouth: Kuryokhin can't speak English, but he knows exactly what English sounds like.

He returns to rapid-fire Russian. "The basic principle of Popular Mechanics is to perform music from any period, from any people, with love, attentively, and on a very high level," he says, drumming frenetically on the table. At 35, Kuryokhin has yet to show signs of slowing down. "Some say I'm making a parody of music, but that's not the case. I try to put the

music into an unusual context, and the strange combinations of incompatible music produce an unusual effect of a completely new quality."

Kuryokhin is holding court in the home of his good friend Sasha Lipnitsky, bassist for the Moscow band Zvuki Mu, one of the best live acts in the country. With Kuryokhin and his group, the Popular Mechanics Orchestra, in town, famous and infamous figures from the Moscow-Leningrad countercultural axis (called *rysvodka*, or "the scene") drift in from various frozen neighborhoods in both cities. Sasha's apartment, which recently played host to the likes of Nastassia Kinski and Brian Eno, now picks up a kind of Brownian motion as musicians cranked, the telephone jangles, bottles are cracked open, people start to dance, and discarded clothing piles up on the floor. Meanwhile a pall of smoke rises; saints and martyrs watch from icons hanging on the walls. Lipnitsky holds forth on Russian cultural dynamics through his big beard, film stars and jazz musicians pound on the door, words get slurred into ever more syllabic Cyrillic; and Zvuki Mu's eccentric lead singer, Petya Mamonov, shows up, crooked and gregarious as usual. It's *rysvodka* on a good night, a kind of "ecstasy of dancing fleas" with a gathering acceleration after the big

hand passes 12 and a pregnant moon rises over the Kremlin.

In the eye of this hurricane sits Kuryokhin, harshly lit by a naked light bulb. He has been a key player in Russian rock for all of its "second wave" (1980-88) and is no less central to Soviet free jazz—a fusion he managed almost inadvertently, by defying attempts at categorization. In



POPULAR MECHANICS MAESTRO, SERGEY KURYOKHIN.

that regard he is probably best compared in this country to the new music composers of New York's Downtown School—some of whom he performed and recorded with



THE BAND'S BRASS SECTION AT AN OUTDOOR REHEARSAL.

during his first American tour this fall. Kuryokhin has just recorded in New York for Nonesuch Records with John Zorn and Gidon Kremer. His visit to the United States culminated in mid-November with the prestigious Thelonious Monk Piano Competition in Washington, D.C.

Kuryokhin has been "competitive with capitalist musical culture" for a long time now. When Leo Records, a tiny London label specializing in Russian jazz, released his first solo piano album in 1981, it created respectful ripples in the world press. At home, reviewer Efim Barban wrote in the Leningrad *samizdat* jazz journal *Kvadrat* that the album reveals "a drama of the man who can see no aesthetic escape from musical nonconformity." Leonid Perevertzev, a leading Russian jazz musicologist, describes Kuryokhin's persona this way: "He is involved in a total destruction of musical linguistics—linguistics in the sense of musical syntax. He's a juggler of different means of musical language. Rock musicians can't say he's rock; jazz musicians can't say he's jazz. He's like a revolutionary whose destiny is to destroy things and give a chance for others—not him—to build something better. The twentieth-century avant-garde has always aimed at a total destruction of previous forms. Creative activity fulfills a conservative function."

Kuryokhin, whose performances in the early '80s sometimes caused Leningrad subway stations to shut down mysteriously—a feeble attempt at crowd control by the invisible KGB—has never fulfilled a "conservative function." Yegor Ligachev, until very recently the Communist Party secretary in charge of ideology, *does* fulfill a conservative function. Last July, when he was still considered the second-most-powerful man in the Soviet Union, Ligachev condemned Kuryokhin's group in a speech printed in the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura*. "The genuine value of a work of art," he said, "is insured by a combination of profound party ideological commitment and artistic merit. Unfortunately, there have been quite a few examples that deviate from this principle. For instance, a documentary has been made in Leningrad about the Popular Mechanics group. What an ideological and artistic jumble!"

Ligachev went on to observe that "the waves of restructuring and renewal have also washed up some scum and debris." It was the kind of speech that could have come from Andropov or Chernenko, Gor-

bachev's predecessors, who cracked down so hard on Russian underground rock that even "official" musicians ran for cover. But as the poles of power have shifted in the Soviet Union over the last three years, Kuryokhin's official status has spun 180 degrees; at the time of the speech, he was buried in concert requests, film projects, and recording proposals. "It's very good publicity," he yells through the smoke-screen and sonic boom in Lipnitsky's apartment. "After this I'll include Ligachev among the spiritual fathers of Popular Mechanics."

Ironically enough, a week before Kuryokhin's arrival in the United States, Ligachev was taken down several pegs—to the less glamorous position of party secretary in charge of agriculture. In the context of Mikhail Gorbachev's recent consolidation of power, there couldn't have been a more telling pair of indicators of the direction Soviet cultural policy was taking. Ligachev managed a pretty fair description of Kuryokhin's group, though: Popular Mechanics, a free-wheeling confederacy of musicians (rock, jazz, blues, classical), artists (painters, actors, mimes, "unofficial" fashion designers, poets), and animals (geese, goats), is definitely an "ideological and artistic jumble." Kuryokhin's Orchestra is a late-twentieth-century crossbreed of Zappa's Mothers, Warhol's Factory, and Noah's Ark.

Sergey Kuryokhin himself manages to be both a preternaturally fast keyboard technician and a composer with a uniquely Slavic, seriocomic sensibility. He has played sessions with almost every Russian rock and jazz band worth mentioning. In the early '80s he was a driving force in Aquarium—now the anointed supergroup of *glasnost*, then a band sneaking into Moscow disguised as "Radio Africa" to play surreptitious gigs in "closed" venues. Kuryokhin took Aquarium's relatively unambitious folk rock and stoked the coals, empowering acoustic sets with furious keyboard runs and bringing in the funk of electric guitarist Andrey Otriaskin. Leningrad's James "Blood" Ulmer. Aquarium's underground albums with Kuryokhin are their best work; he dropped out of the band in '86 because of "artistic differences"—though he doesn't mince words: "Aquarium is shit."

Kuryokhin also collaborates extensively with free-jazz sax prodigy Vladimir Chekasin—one-third of the late great Ganelin Trio—and other musicians in the small but formidable Soviet free-jazz

scene. As with Popular Mechanics, his concerts with Chekasin generally involve odd, irregular theatrical effects and skewed time signatures building to a sardonic musical frenzy, punctuated by periodic stalled silence—the whole thing held together by what Kuryokhin calls "an element of idiotism."

Popular Mechanics, though, is the major distiller of the element. The idiosyncratic sequences of genres conjured up by the Orchestra frequently resemble a fantastic moving junk sculpture. Goats, punks, and classical violinists wait for cues backstage. A Soviet pop star sings the song that made her famous twenty years ago. Two middle-aged "party officials" stagger forward, plant a spittoon at the edge of the stage, and sway beside it: it's a parody of a Soviet election; votes go in the "box." A parade of models, outfitted by designer Katya Filipova in her neo-Stalinist-bondage "Economic Achievements Style," threads through a frenetic free-jazz jam session. Eventually Spitball, the 7-foot-tall androgynous centerpiece of the Leningrad show band Auction, appears. He dances furiously at the lip of the orchestra pit and then falls weeping to his knees. Finally the fat lady sings—an aria, backed by Kino, the Leningrad rock group usually at the Orchestra core.

Wearing an embroidered denim jacket with CAPTAIN stenciled on the back, Kuryokhin attempts to steer this explosion from the dashboard of a black, wedge-shaped Prophet synthesizer. He is assisted

by "Afrika," a Leningrad artist/actor/musician; when his career as teen screen idol permits, Afrika functions as Kuryokhin's second in command and handles the animal menagerie. "Popular Mechanics escapes out of control after the first third of a performance—not only sometimes but almost always," Kuryokhin says. "In the last two-thirds I'm trying to bring it back to the structure planned earlier. But I always get to the end that I thought up beforehand. It's very important that, after things seem out of control, there be a feeling the form has reached completion."

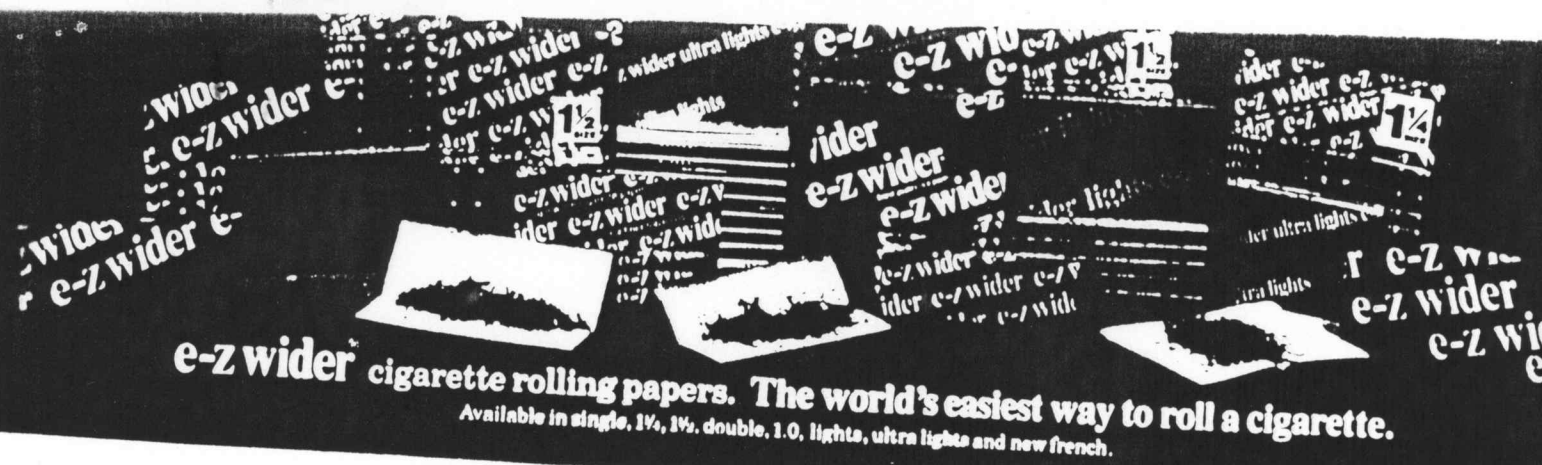
Even at the height of entropy, the discord onstage generally provides a springboard for the music, and vice versa. In one concert with Chekasin late in '86, Kuryokhin completed a high-speed finger-bending sprint down the length of the keyboard by collapsing in a heap to the side of the piano, as if the descending run had catapulted him into unconsciousness. On another night, "sampled" Pushkin came out of his Prophet—a poem every Soviet child has to memorize in school. This time, though, the stanzas babbled and repeated themselves hysterically, lyrical fragments sadistically shredded and stuffed into a James Brown riff, until the poem virtually frothed at the mouth. With memories of Soviet teachers dancing puppetlike in their heads, the audience roared. Kuryokhin stresses that he isn't trying to trash Pushkin or anybody else: "I simply tried to delve structurally into the compo-

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l'afrique

AFRIKA—REAL NAME, SERGEY BUGAEV—IS A PROMINENT FIXTURE IN LENINGRAD'S BURGEONING ART SCENE. A RENAISSANCE PUNK, AFRIKA NOT ONLY PERFORMS WITH POPULAR MECHANICS BUT ALSO HAS STARRED IN FILMS AND MADE A NAME FOR HIMSELF AS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S YOUNG ARTISTS.



POPULAR MECHANICS

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sition of the Pushkin text. It seems to me that the word "parody" is not associated with love, and people who construct parodies do not love what they parody, they look at it from a superior position, as if were "I very much love what I play."

When it comes to disavowing parody, though, he's being a little disingenuous. A recent Popular Mechanics concert in Sweden involved a tank, a fifty piece military band, flocks of sheep and geese, flapping red banners, and a choir of unwashed Leningrad anarchists singing pompous Communist songs. Kuryokhin intuitively understands the black riffs of engagement; he's been seen sawing pianos in half, sending an electric guitarist wearing only a jockstrap out to jam with a classical chamber orchestra, and releasing a goat in the middle of a squealing mob of saxophonists just to see what would happen (the goat

panicked) In his stolid nation of genteel classical recitals and world class documentary pianists, many of these pranks are tantamount to sneaking an ice cream cone into Lenin's tomb, landing a light plane in Red Square, or not taking "no" for an answer.

"He's aiming to reach a kind of euphoric state, you know, a celebration, and he manages it," explains Russian émigré record producer Leo Feigin, who witnessed the Swedish concert. "It's very involving. He involved the people, and of course there are many elements of parody—it's a parody of Soviet official art. But I wouldn't call this "anti-Soviet," because nowadays, you see, they are allowed to laugh at themselves. And what is important is that there is a parody of the Western way of life as well. In Berlin, for example, the saxophone player came forward playing a very sweet rendition of Frank Sinatra's "I Did It My Way," and the members of the Orchestra put their hands on one

another's shoulders, swinging to the music and making idiotic faces, and it was very funny. It's a parody of Western kitsch as well."

What is known of Kuryokhin in the West is for the most part due to Feigin, whose London based Leo Records is a major artery for Russian avant garde music in the West. Kuryokhin's eight Leo releases began in 1981 with *The Ways of Freedom*—careening cerebral solo piano—and ended this fall with *Pop Mechanics #17*, an early live recording of the Orchestra. In between came three albums that capture Kuryokhin at his mercurial best: *Sentenced to Silence* with saxophonist Anatoly Napirov, *Exercises*, with Chikasen, and *Popular Zoological Elements*, more improvisations, these shot through with unexpected lyricism. Last summer's *Introduction to Pop Mechanics* failed to capture the instrumental impact of the Orchestra at full tilt (Leo Records are distributed in the U.S. by New Music Dis-

tribution Service, 500 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.)

Two other albums worth mentioning are *Red Wave: Your Russian Underground Bands* (Bigtime Records), a compilation album featuring one side of Aquarium propelled by Kuryokhin, and *Invest Culture* (Ark Records), a freakish studio collage packed with Slavic irony. "Ideally, Kuryokhin smirks, "you should listen to the two albums simultaneously, at the highest possible volume."

Leo Feigin doesn't skip a beat when the telephone wakes him early one morning and the caller asks what Kuryokhin may have in store for the U.S. "Well, for example, in Berlin on September 23, there was a pig, a big pig, which was singing," Feigin replies, surfacing from his dreams. "They were holding it up high—they raised the pig up to the microphone, you know. It was hilarious, absolutely hilarious. The Orchestra was playing and the pig was singing." []

SEOUL

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Nations, and American delegates who had spent twenty years in opposition to their government's policies from Vietnam to Lebanon found themselves in the curious position of feeling for a few days like Daniel Patrick Moynihan. It was an impression that was reinforced when, at the end of the congress, a Korean delegate got up and, to great applause, asserted: "While American white people were killing Red Indians, Koreans were writing beautiful poetry." *Han and more han.*

In fact, the Americans had done nothing more than throw a cocktail party one night at a second-class hotel in a noisy part of downtown Seoul and refuse to attend a number of official PEN banquets during

the course of the congress, on the grounds that it would be repulsive to do so when Korean writers PEN had championed were on hunger strikes in their jail cells. Ironically, one of the guests of honor at the American party—a poet, just out of jail, who had been horribly tortured—refused to share the podium in the hotel ballroom because he felt that the Americans were in some ultimate sense responsible for what he had undergone. Later that night, back in the hotel where the congress was being held, it was possible to see the bulky figure of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, clad in a bright yellow Hawaiian shirt, losing quite a significant amount of money in the casino, and it seemed that these Russians were more the kinds of writers the Koreans had in mind in the first place.

The congress ended in the same spirit as

it had begun. For the first time in its recent history, PEN, bowing to Korean pressure, declined to vote on a resolution condemning the treatment of writers in Korea. The group decided that Francis King would hand PEN's petition about the writers to the Minister of Information when he came to the closing ceremony. At the last minute, however, one of the Korean PEN delegates informed King that it would not be "appropriate" for the petition to be handed to the Minister in front of everyone. That would be embarrassing. And, of course, King went along. This was not, after all, New York or Paris or even Belgrade. This was Seoul.

At the end of the congress, the American and Danish delegations staked themselves to a kind of "pariah's dinner" at a restaurant in one of the older parts of

Seoul. As the evening progressed and the *soju* flowed, we amused ourselves by trying to pick the site of the next PEN congress—Pyongyang, North Korea, perhaps, or Asunción, Paraguay. Finally, after much wrangling, it was agreed that the ideal locale had to be Iran. If Francis King should still be PEN president (he is said to be running again), he could concoct indignant justifications for the wearing of the chador and perhaps offer a petition (in the green room, of course, not onstage) for the alleviation of some of the more sanguinary penalties of Islamic law as interpreted by the mullahs who would be our hosts. And all the while, there would be some Yugoslav vice president to remind one: "After all, this is not New York or Paris or Belgrade or even Seoul. This is Teheran." []