

WAX IN THE



You've got your US and UK releases, and your French EPs, but how's about some Russian plastic? Doug Shipton looks east to see what's available



As the global stampede in the pursuit of underexposed and underappreciated far-flung vinyl treasures rumbles on, we've seen, over the past decade or so, reappraisals of artists, labels and scenes the world over. Take a trip to your local record shop and you'll undoubtedly find a galaxy of sections categorised by country, region and a host of sub-genres previously consigned to the all-encompassing "world" section nestled comfortably in the racks alongside the more standard fare. With eager collectors and record companies continuing to leave no stone unturned, in recent years, those magpie eyes have been increasingly fixed to the former Eastern bloc and the erstwhile Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Though these curious records, housed in beautifully ornate yet cryptic Cyrillic sleeves, have been a regular fixture in record shop bargain bins, charity shops and boot fairs the length and breadth of the country for quite some time, serious trade in Soviet records was, up until a few years ago, almost exclusively regulated by activity on certain internet auction sites; as enthusiastic collectors with bulging virtual piggybanks crashed head-on with shrewd sellers in a flurry of outlandish bids and crazy price fluctuations. At times a closely guarded secret, some unscrupulous dealers would whip up bidding frenzies for their wares utilising the indecipherable sleeves – not to mention the frustratingly common practice of listing "secret squirrels" (selling records without revealing the artist, title and sometimes even the sleeve itself) – with often misleadingly tantalising audio snippets and trumped-up descriptions designed to artificially inflate prices for what have now been discovered to be, more often than not, commonplace records. The inevitable result has been the use of online auction results to justify inflated price tags as the norm.

Faced with the arduous but rewarding task of circumventing such problems, rule number one for any record collector attempting a foray into the unknown should always be: do your homework. This is a much more feasible concept in this day and age (thanks in no small

part to the internet), and even a cursory investigation in this case will set you on the right path by revealing a common thread that runs between all Soviet records prior to the late 80s: they were all released on a label called Melodiya.

Much like their former Communist counterparts in neighbouring Poland (Polskie Nagrania Muza); Bulgaria (Balkanton); Hungary (Hungaroton); and the Czech Republic (Supraphon, Panton and Opus), Melodiya was the state-owned label of the Soviet Union, which monopolised the industry from 1964 to 1989, controlling every aspect, from recording to manufacture and distribution. A household name among



classical collectors and hardened completists – particularly Beatles collectors (Paul McCartney fans will be familiar with Melodiya as the label responsible for the first release of his 1988 solo album, *Back In The USSR*, which was reissued internationally in 1991 following the fall of the Soviet Union) – it is the home-grown talent that has drawn much of the recent attention, among which you'll find the unlikely pop heroes who never quite managed to break out from behind the iron curtain.

However, with still relatively little known about this now semi-defunct institution, plus the aforementioned Cyrillic alphabet to negotiate (as well as the numerous English and Romanized translations – the transliteration of the Russian language from the Cyrillic alphabet

into the Latin alphabet), multiple pressings from seven different plants with a wealth of label colours (denoting from which plant it originated), as well as different sleeves (domestic and export pressings with often unique sleeves, as well as the use of generic house bags) – you'll need to stay late on this one if you're going to get any extra credit.

Indexed using both Melodiya catalogue numbers and Government Industrial Standard (or GOST) numbers – anything made and sold in the Soviet Union required one – you'll find records pressed under a strict regime of state-approved bands and licenced musicians underpinned by a scene most commonly referred to as the VIA Sound (vocal and instrumental ensembles) – an entirely state-manufactured movement of "safe" pop stars more in the vein of light performers and variety acts, designed to distract an eager youth from the harmful influences of their Western peers. Consisting of carefully controlled groups directed by sanctioned conductors and composers playing state-approved songs, lyrics, outfits and even the musicians' movements on stage were all scrutinised. Yet, beneath the Formica exterior lies a trove of fascinatingly unique music which was the result of a very particular time and cultural landscape.

Comprising 15 republics, the Soviet Union at its peak covered roughly one-sixth of the globe, enveloping a wealth of divergent nationalities. With pressing plants scattered throughout the republics (Georgia, Uzbekistan, Latvia, plus Leningrad and two in Moscow), Melodiya was able to appease the smaller, localised markets, as well as a larger, more commercial demand. Artistic creativity clashed at every level with political and ideological forces to create something wholly unique – not just in the shape of Soviet approximations of Western artists and styles, but also the unique cultures within its expansive borders.

With tight regulation on what was available to the record-buying public, trade in forbidden Western imports was initially driven underground (until state suppression eased and domestic pressings started to appear), while young musicians on the outskirts of the outer lying republics might have been lucky enough

USSR

to catch the weird and wonderful sounds of a world denied them drifting in on radio waves across borders. It's not surprising then that VIA records tend to be an incoherent collage of styles and genres – which happens to be both the charm and main pitfall in buying them.

For those looking for a genuinely alternate and more subversive history of Soviet pop culture, there are also the murky underground scenes that dealt in home-recorded tapes and flexidiscs pressed on discarded hospital X-rays. But that's another story...

As the dust has settled on the initial frenzy surrounding this relatively fledgling scene, so too have the prices. This, comrades, is a beginner's guide to some of the artists and records that no budding Communist collection can be without.

Pressing plant information has been provided for the specific records featured. Moscow, Leningrad (aka St Petersburg) and Riga pressings are the most common, while Tbilisi pressings are the rarest of any given release. First-press enthusiasts will be thrilled to know that GOST numbers relate to pressing runs for 5-10 year periods, of which there are four, while pressing numbers for each title at each plant remain unknown.

ALEXANDER GRADSKY & THE MELODIYA ENSEMBLE Romance O Vlyublennyh/Romance For Lovers (Aprelevsky plant (Moscow) pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 90054478) 1974 **£50**



Anyone with a passing interest in Soviet rock records will know this as the much-touted and original holy grail of Melodiya long-players. However, more importantly, it is the record that marked the arrival proper of Alexander Borisovich Gradsky.

Composed by Gradsky and performed by George Garanian's Melodiya Ensemble, this ground-breaking score for Andrei Konchalovsky's film proved to be the launch pad for Gradsky's illustrious solo career and was as popular with fans then as it is with drum-break obsessives now.

ARIEL Russkie Kartinky/Russian Pictures (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 600864142) 1977 **£10**

One of the more staple ensembles, Ariel cut

their teeth playing rock arrangements for traditional folk songs. Founded by Valery Yarushin, Ariel hail from the city of Chelyabinsk, near the Ural Mountains. Their progressive sound won them national acclaim, making them a household name in the Soviet Union and even saw them tour West Germany and the US (a feat managed by only a handful of Soviet groups).

DOS-MUKASAN Dos-Mukasan (Uzbekistan pressing, LP, Melodiya C 6007677) 1976 **£300**

Known as the "Kazakh Beatles" (more for their status and fashion sense than their sound), this Central Asian curio is unjustly tagged as "psych" owing to the blisteringly schizophrenic eight-minute instrumental





ДОО-МУКАДУН АНСАМБЛІ

opener; but what follows is a veritable smorgasbord of styles. Blue-eyed ballads, beat-group shuffles and oompah pop make this undoubtedly more Russian-sounding than rooted in Khazkh folk tradition.



IVERIA Iveria (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 60056512) 1975 **£100**

A Georgian ensemble founded in 1968 by Alexandre Basilaia, and named after an ancient Georgian kingdom, Iveria released four studio albums as well as a handful of soundtracks and collaborative efforts. However, where most Soviet LPs suffer from a lack of cohesion, without doubt Iveria's self-titled debut is the most rounded rock LP to emerge from the VIA scene, making this one of the more desirable Melodiya records. Drawing heavily on the Georgian folk tradition of using polyphonic vocals, but managing to steer closer than most to the sounds of their Western counterparts, Iveria

quite literally wear their influences on their sleeves, as the album features covers of the Uriah Heep classics, Sunrise and July Morning.



COLLAGE Käkikiri/Cuckoo-Runes (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya C 600873940) 1979 **£60**

Stalwarts of the runo-songs (traditional Estonian folk) scene, Rivo Dikson's arty Collage ensemble included students from The Tallinn Conservatory and The Tallinn School Of Music and Pedagogical Institute. Taking their name from their varied style, this vocal jazz collective slightly outgrew their traditional roots for this, their third and finest LP.

RAIMOND PAULS Jūras Balss/Voice Of The Sea (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 0454546) 1974 **£15**

Composer, arranger, director, producer, pianist and now politician, Raimonds Pauls is a legend of Latvian music. Having chanced his arm at pretty much every facet of the industry, he has worked with countless musicians, groups and singers across the board, but it's a handful of "solo" albums, as well as his jazz fusion studio



pet project, Modo (previously known as Studija), along with the pairing of Latvian light music legends, Nora Bumbiere and Viktors Lapcenoks (both originally Modo members), which stand out.

ALEXANDER GRADSKY Reflexões Do Bobo/Reflections Of A Jester (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya C 6026447004) 1987 **£20**

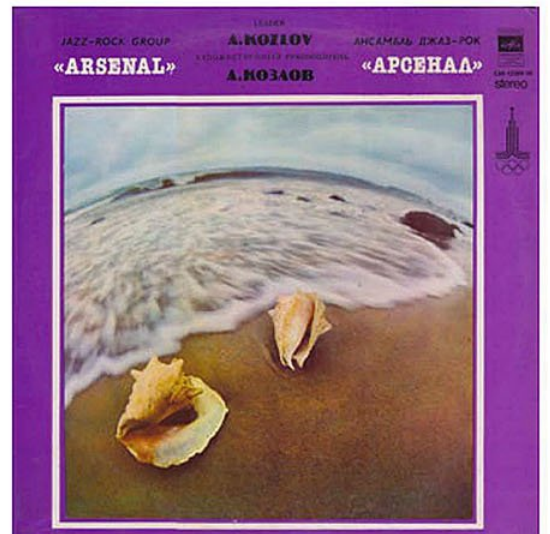


Gradsky again, this time with a 1987 compilation of late-60s tracks recorded between 1971 and 1974. Sounds confusing, but all you need

to know is, herein lies the trademark progressive Gradsky sound. A tip of the cap to his former band, Skomorokhi (The Jesters), the overtly polished production on the majority of cuts might not be to everyone's taste, but the ingredients are all here. Another worthy milestone in Gradsky's career is his first solo effort without a director, his 1979 progressive opus, *Russian Songs*.

ARSENAL Arsenal (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya C 601220910, 1980) **£15**

The now legendary, then underground jazz saxophonist Alexey Kozlov formed the progressive jazz-rock behemoths Arsenal in the early 70s and went on to record 10 LPs up until 1991. Their self-titled debut is widely considered their definitive work and



the cornerstone of the genre. Recorded in Riga during a tour of Latvia in 1977, it was not released until 1980, coinciding with the group's live appearance on the *Olimpiad-80* programme, which beamed them into living rooms across the world. This early edition of the record even carries the Olympic logo on the sleeve.



PESNYARY *Pesnyary II* (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 04655556) 1974 **£20**

Under the stewardship of Vladimir Mulyavin, this Belarusian nine-piece combo (previously known as Liavony) began their career, much like most of the ensembles, covering Beatles songs with Russian lyrics. With a style not too dissimilar to Ariel, Pesnyary were hugely popular – even matching Ariel's triumph of touring the US. Having failed to record a definitive LP, this, the second of three self-titled LPs (as well as all of their albums), is worth picking up for their moments of genius.

MELODIYA JAZZ ENSEMBLE *Labyrinth* (Leningrad [St Petersburg] pressing, LP, Melodiya C 60052778) 1974 **£50**

With jazz having been widely vilified as a bourgeois indulgence in the USSR in the 50s, it was only a matter of time before a younger generation of classically-trained musicians would leap at the opportunity to embrace this hugely influential phenomenon. When restrictions were finally lifted and attitudes had softened, as house band for Melodiya itself, this ensemble would become best known for being the most authentic recorded jazz band in the Soviet Union. Headed by the first bona fide Soviet jazz star,



saxophonist George Garanian, this is their fifth studio album and only one of two to feature entirely original compositions.

EDUARD ARTEMIEV *Moods* (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya C 1021077002) 1984 **£30**



Best known for scoring Andrei Tarkovsky's sci-fi/art flick, *Solaris*, classically-trained film composer Eduard Artemiev was one

of the earliest pioneers of Soviet electronic music and one of first to use the Soviet-made ANS synthesiser. A fascination with experimental music and art-rock saw him combine his academic sensibilities with Eastern motifs to create New Age electronics. Assisted by Yuri Bogdanov at the controls of this complicated new technology, together they would form the studio outfit Boomerang and score a host of films, excerpts of which are compiled on this LP.

ALEKSANDER ZATSEPIN *Razgovor So Schast'em/Conversation With Happiness* (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya M 60356778) 1973 **£45**

Another record brought to the fore by beat diggers and record producers, this compilation of Zatsepin soundtracks deserves more credit than its "one-tracker" reputation. Famed almost exclusively for his films scores, the closest Zatsepin got to



international fame was composing the soundtrack to *The Red Tent*, starring Sean Connery (though the international cut of the film was re-scored by Ennio Morricone). With appearances from the Melodiya Ensemble and Sofia Rotaru (among others) this is a real mixed bag, as pastoral folk passages give way to some amazing funk-rock workouts.

THE BAYAN MONGOL VARIETY GROUP *The Bayan Mongol Variety Group* (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya C 901595960) 1980 **£600**

Much like the Dos-Mukasan LP, it is the relative obscurity (and scarcity) of this far-flung Soviet release that helps it command such a hefty price tag. That's not to say that it doesn't warrant its place at the top of collectors' wants lists. Released on Melodiya's Mongol Ayalgau (Mongolian Voice) imprint alongside the equally sought-after LP by Soyol-Erdene, Mongolian folk





standards are melded with disparate Western styles to make something quite unique. Nigh on impossible to find in any condition and with the recent surge in pan-Asian pop sounds, this has undoubtedly become one of the rarest of the VIA sound records.

JAAN KUMAN INSTRUMENTAL ENSEMBLE Tantsurütme VI/Dance Rhythms VI (Latvia pressing, 7", Melodiya C 620735960) 1976 **£30**

Renowned jazz trumpeter Jaan Kuman put together this underground supergroup of Estonian soloists in the early 70s, combining elements of jazz and big-band funk under the banner of "dance music" – most probably to avoid state intervention. One in a volume of six EPs issued under the same name ("tantsurütme" means "dance rhythms"), the hallmarks are all there (Stan Getz, Freddie Hubbard and Oscar Peterson works, to name a few) but the style is very much the Ensemble's own.

ALLA PUGACHEVA Mirror Of The Soul (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 C 6009799802) 1977 **£20**

The undisputed queen of Soviet (and subsequently Russian) pop, Alla Pugacheva has been a permanent fixture on turntables and TV screens throughout the region since the late 70s, making her the most successful Melodiya recording artist. Starting out with the Siberian *schlager* group Yunost', (Youth), Alla cut her first record with Vesyolye Rebyata (a very popular VIA, who also counted Alexander Gradsky as a former member) for Bulgarian state label, Balkanton, before releasing her debut solo

record on Melodiya. A mix of funky rock/disco hybrids and ballads, it was originally pressed as a double-album and later split over two LPs (a common Melodiya practise). One of the biggest-selling albums in the history of the label, there are over 100 variant pressings in circulation.



VIA 75 VIA 75 (Aprelevsky plant pressing LP, Melodiya C 60081912) 1976 **£60**

This Georgian ensemble's sound is again typical of the region, but with former VIA Orera director Robert Bardzimashvili injecting the funk into proceedings, this self-titled debut (also known as *Orovela*) features a cast of students freshly picked from the Tbilisi Conservatoire playing a mixture of jazz-rock reworkings of folk songs, as well as a couple of surprising covers in the shape of Something 'Bout You Baby I Like, made famous by Tom Jones (later covered by Status Quo), and Separate Ways, the flipside to Elvis Presley's Always On My Mind.



DAVID TUKHMANOV Po Volne Moyei Pamyati/On The Crest Of My Memory (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya C 60072712) 1975 **£15**

Reputed to be the first of only a handful of concept records to ever be released on Melodiya, this ambitious but light-hearted progressive rock opus takes its cues from the then tried-and-tested Western template, though the only concept to speak of is that the subject matter has been taken from classical European poems.

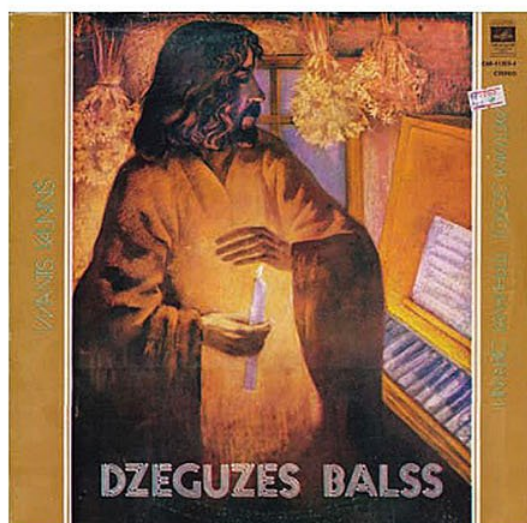


ESTRADINIS ORKESTRAS OKTAVA Oktava (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya 33 CM 034378) 1972 **£20**

This is the only solo studio outing of the Lithuanian house band of choice, Oktava, conducted by Mindaugas Tamošiūnas. An impressive showcase of their broad repertoire of jazzy pop and rock, there are some surprisingly experimental moments – the more astute listener might even notice a couple of numbers that sound suspiciously similar to The Outsiders' Bend Me, Shape Me and The Rolling Stones' Gimme Shelter.

IMANTS KALNIŅŠ & MENUETS Dzeguzes Balss/The Call Of Cuckoo (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya C 60113034) 1979 **£15**

Hailing from Latvia, Menuets essentially served as a conduit for Imants Kalniņš, one of the original Soviet hippies, who has courted great controversy throughout his career. By all accounts, he upset the established order to such an extent with his first band, 2xBBM, that he was subsequently banned from doing anything other than



composing. A later addition to the VIA scene, and with a darker, more progressive sound, plus slicker production, this LP teeters on the cusp of the new era of more studio-based VIA groups and the sound that was to come.

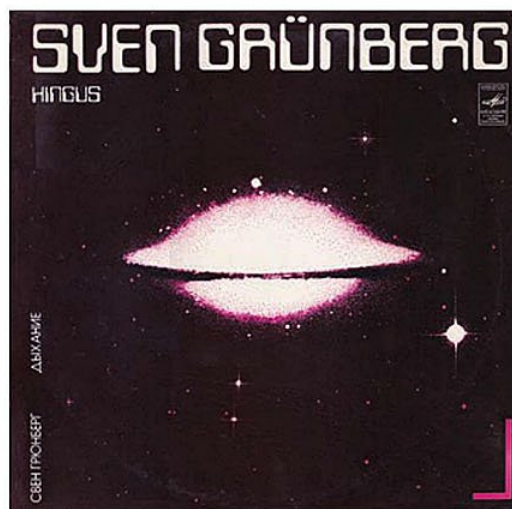


GAYA Gaya (Aprelevsky plant pressing LP, Melodiya 33 C 600481112) 1974 **£60**

Another interesting record from the outer reaches of the USSR, Gaya were an Azerbaijani outfit who started out as a vocal singing group before being given ensemble status by the government. Subsequently, they became a VIA beat group of sorts, incorporating Latin grooves into their sound (this album features a cover of José Fernández Díaz's Cuban staple, Guantanamera) yet still managing to straddle a line somewhere between the two.

ZODIAC Disco Alliance (Aprelevsky plant pressing, LP, Melodiya C 60137712) 1980 **£15**

The debut album from Latvian group Zodiac, whom many consider to be the Soviet forerunners of the space-disco scene that had previously blown up in France with bands like Space and Rockets. The sleeve misleadingly declares Zodiac to be a rock instrumental group, but the heavy use of synthesisers and obvious Euro-disco influences, coupled with legendary Latvian producer Aleksandrs Grīva (father of band member Zane Grīva and Raimonds Pauls' right-hand man) at the helm, helped make this a hugely popular record and an important milestone in the development of electronic rock in the Soviet Union.



SVEN GRÜNBERG Hingus (Latvia pressing, LP, Melodiya C 90163012) 1981 **£20**

Like most recording artists who fell foul of the overzealous Soviet authorities, Estonian ambient electronic pioneer Sven Grünberg's modest output garnered only moderate success at the time but deserves a second listen. As a founding member of progressive rock group Mess, he found himself in hot water with censors when they submitted their debut album to Melodiya in the mid-70s. Considered too provocative, it was subsequently shelved (eventually to be released in full in 2004). Sven re-emerged a few years later, this time taking top billing over the newly-named Ansambel Mess, with the release of a self-titled 7". A huge departure from their previous prog leanings, this meditative ambient EP, recorded using synthesisers built by fellow Mess founder Härmo Härmo, sowed the seed (even

featuring the title track) for Sven's entirely synth-based debut solo LP, which was issued the following year.



GUNESH I Can See The Earth (Gramzapis plant [Moscow] pressing, LP, Melodiya C 6021197007) 1984 **£75**

In the late 70s/early 80s, Turkmenistan produced two jazz-rock ensembles that were responsible for two of the most highly-prized Melodiya long-players today, Gunesh and Firyuza. Decent copies of Firyuza's only release and Gunesh's debut will set you back a small fortune, but the latter's second, more progressive-sounding (and more affordable) album is equally as impressive. Anchored around the incredible drumming of Rashid Shafi, blistering progressive jazz-rock takes on Central Asian *mugams* (traditional folk songs) make this essential for any fan of the genre.

