



Anna Ceeh in Conversation with Alexei Borisov

AC: You've just come back from an international tour of several weeks?

AB: I used to play primarily at festivals; my tours were always with larger projects such as Volga, an ethno-electronic project I launched with Angela Manukian in 1997, and Notchnoi Prospekt, the electropop duo Ivan Sokolovsky and I started in 1985. Now I've decided to try out this form of concert appearance, which is actually new to me. It is much more intense and dense, both artistically speaking and in geographical terms.

AC: In thirty-five years of work in the Soviet, the Russian, and of course also the international scenes, you've not just peripherally influenced the history of Soviet-Russian underground music and Russian experimental and electronic music—you helped write it.

AB: Yes, that's probably true, I was right there when Soviet and Russian experimental as well as electronic music, industrial, and the rock scene, too, were born. At least there's a lot for me to look back on. Most of it was happening in the late 1970s and 1980s. This sort of music was played primarily in student clubs and cafés, sometimes also in movie theaters and so-called "culture clubs" operated by various factories, institutes, or ministries. Later on, after 1986 or '87, many underground rock bands started playing in coliseums and soccer stadiums. Of course, experimental music tended to exist in smaller venues such as student clubs, jazz cafés, or galleries. But after 1985 the government pretty much legalized all kinds of music that had been prohibited before. In the mid-1980s, Notchnoi Prospekt was fairly popular, and even when we played more experimental stuff the promoters would invite us to play at major festivals all over the country. The electronic or experimental scene of the 1980s was very small. There were Sergei Kuryokhin and Pop Mechanics, New Composers from Saint Petersburg, ZGA from Riga and Saint Petersburg, TRI O, Alexei Tegin Group, Michael Chekalin, Metro, and our Notchnoi Prospekt from Moscow.

AC: For you, the 1980s were defined by Center and Notchnoi Prospekt, the first Soviet New Wave and industrial formations, your first professional equipment, and nationwide success. You brought the Moscow "university underground" to the big stage, to crowded stadiums, and lived a sort of "Soviet Dream."

AB: It all happened very unexpectedly and quickly. At first we were still playing in basements, apartments, student cafés, and ran into trouble with the authorities, with the police. After 1985 we abruptly found ourselves on gigantic stages, often also playing with Western musicians. It was an unforgettable experience.

AC: That's also how you met Frank Zappa?

AB: We met him in Moscow in 1989, his response to our music (Notchnoi Prospekt) was very positive, and he invited us to work on his movie.

AC: And that's how you garnered international success as well, playing concerts in the West, for example in Vienna?

AB: You can hardly call that real success, but Western audiences indeed received us very favorably,



in the West.

AC: You launched your solo career in early 1990, trading your guitar for individual solo productions—with electronic technology replacing the individuals, as it were. What does that difference feel like to you?

AB: I first experimented with solo projects as early as the 1980s. I would use a Tascam 4-track Portastudio device, a guitar, and a synthesizer I got from Sokolovsky. I still found it difficult, technically and emotionally, to see myself as an independent musician, so I stuck with the various collaborative projects—but the sense that I could also do something by myself made it much easier to communicate and collaborate with others.

AC: Which is to say, electronic music and the new and digital technologies drew your interest early on?

AB: Of course—I visited the computer center at Moscow State University, where my father worked, when I was still a child. The electronic music that became part of my music collection in the 1970s and 1980s likewise stimulated my interest in new technologies. But the involvement of electronic sound was episodic even in the 1980s. I was always interested in combining digital and analog technologies. I advocate a synthesis of the most recent technologies with vintage ones.

AC: Later on, there were additional collaborations, such as the successful duo F.R.U.I.T.S. (1992) with Pavel Jagun, a well-known Russian composer, songwriter, and specialist for electronic music—a mix of bass-dominated electro-drum’n’noise, futuristic soundscapes, and shredded vocals that was avant-gardistic in its time. Your doctoral dissertation on the Falkland conflict, though almost finished, disappeared into a drawer in the late 1980s, never to be seen again?


AB: Yes, the number of projects in which I participated rose considerably over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, although I also pursued my solo activities with no less energy. In the late 1990s, Anton Nikkilä from Helsinki and I also founded the label N&B Research Digest. Then there was my work in journalism, DJing, organizational activities. I wanted a form of variety that wouldn’t be detrimental to the creative processes. I studied history, but at some point I suddenly lost interest in the academic work, and it also brought virtually no money, especially in the 1990s.

AC: So you’re one of the few musicians and producers from Moscow’s underground scene, if not the only one, who does nothing but music.

AB: Yes, it would seem so, although I have no official status and get nothing at all from the state. Everyone in Russia needs to have a so-called “labor booklet” where your job is officially recorded. I’ve made my living from music for many years now, but according to the booklet I’m still a manager or something of the sort.

AC: To come to the question of how to visualize your music, your sound: the cover of your album *Before the Evroremont*, which came out on your label N&B Research Digest in 2002, shows views of one of your apartments in Moscow. It functions primarily as your studio and has already become a legendary place, since virtually the entire elite of international electronica has stayed there at one point or another.

AB: The story behind the cover is this: Anton’s wife, the Finnish photographer Anne Hamalainen,



was just working on a series dedicated to the evanescence of the Soviet era—apartment interiors, people, etc. She started shooting in my apartment, my neighborhood. The album was produced in the same rooms, the pictures visualized the place where the sound was created, and so they were by no means chosen at random. And Anne also accompanied my live performance in Helsinki with a slide show from that series. Indeed, many international musicians and sound artists have been to, or stayed at, my apartment. I'm impressed by the list myself: from Holger Czukay, Jimi Tenor, Pan Sonic, KK Null, Franz Pomassl, Anton Nikkilä, Giuseppe Ielasi, Thomas Ankersmit, Jandek, Dave Phillips, Kotra, and Staalplaat Soundsystem to the Canadian singer Dora Bleu, to name just a few.

AC: Yet after all these years, your projects from the 1980s, such as *Center* and *Notchnoi Prospekt*, have not become dusty specimens from the Soviet era—they raise the tempers of today's young people no less than they did back then.

AB: Yes—there is an industrial post-punk band in Moscow, *The Forced Oscillations*, that has several songs by *Notchnoi Prospekt* in its repertoire.

AC: But we should also mention that *Notchnoi Prospekt* still exists! And *Sonic Youth* personally selected you to be the opening act for their concert in Moscow in 2007.

AB: Yes, *Notchnoi Prospekt* is still alive. In fact, we're working on a new album. It will feature both our “veteran” band member Dmitry Kutergin and a young Muscovite drummer and singer, Olga Nosova, with whom I'm simultaneously also working on other projects. 2007 was the second time we opened for *Sonic Youth* in Moscow. The first time was in 1989, immediately after our concert in Vienna. Back then three hundred people came; in 2007 there were already three thousand! That's tangible progress.

AC: How many projects in total are you involved in, and roughly how many albums have you published?

AB: Right now, I'm on several largely electronic band projects such as *Notchnoi Prospekt*, *Astma*, *Gosplan Trio* (with Sergei Letov), *Borisov/Nikkilä*, *Pahom/Borisov/Nosova*. Then there are also international collaborations with Dave Phillips, Thomas Buckner, Jandek, *A Spirale*. I have published around one hundred albums, including compilations, in virtually all formats: vinyl records, tapes, cassettes, CDs, CD-Rs, DVDs, digital albums ...

AC: As far as I know, you've also collaborated with Muscovite artists ...

AB: Yes, primarily with video artists. In the late 1990s, Aristarkh Chernyshev and Vlad Efimov created projections for F.R.U.I.T.S.'s concerts that were based on photographs of the skulls of different animals. Roman Anikushin, Nikita Tsymbal, and Natalia Poloka were involved as VJs for F.R.U.I.T.S. and a couple other projects. And Oleg Kornev made video and slide projections for *Notchnoi Prospekt* as well as the video clip for the track *Voice*.

AC: ... wrote music for films, including by Dziga Vertov?

AB: Yes, for *Faust* (F.W. Murnau), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang), *Aelita* (Yakov Protazanov), *The Eleventh Year* (Dziga Vertov), *Enthusiasm* (Dziga Vertov).



AC: The project *The Morning Line* is, I think, fundamentally different from everything you've done before. How appealing are its parameters—the 47-channel sound system, the public space—to you?

AB: The project is unique. And I'm sure it will be very exciting to work in this particular architectonic context. I will try to use the structure and the sound zones to unify different sound fragments from the past ten years, to create a sort of spatial time report.

AC: In recent years, the “sonic turn” has become a catchphrase in media and cultural studies. Sound as a medium and as a material has acquired greater significance. Do you think, or is it your experience, that sound indeed plays a more important role?

AB: I do think so, yes. Sound has become a very important element of our contemporary life. Sound is now much more complex, more physical, more influential than before. We have so many sound sources around us, sources of different origins and types. And I think that visual stuff of any kind (especially moving images) no longer works without sound.

AC: Do you see potential there with regard to current developments of new terminologies and transfers of knowledge?

AB: Of course. Theoretically, the potential of sound should be increased in the future—especially its ecological and humanitarian potential.