

# Such a Strange Vibration: Rock Music as the Affective Site of Divergence among the Soviet Estonian Nonconformist Youth

Terje Toomistu

## Abstract

While Timothy Leary was preaching “Turn on, tune in, drop out” in the late 1960s in the United States, young people in the Soviet Union were practising another kind of tuning in. Radio Luxembourg and other foreign radio signals leaked through the Iron Curtain, bringing with them “the strange vibration” that sparked new social arenas and affective engagements. Iconic hippie-era albums were illicitly distributed, copied on reel-to-reel tapes, and exchanged within the networks of music lovers. In Soviet Estonia a distinctive rock music scene evolved.

Rock music was the key source and the means of divergence for the nonconformist youth of Soviet Estonia, many of whom identified as or were connected to the hippies. The radically different sound of psychedelic rock prompted ecstatic states of mind and triggered new imaginaries. The affective engagements with music created a sense of connection with the global pop culture and youth movements and, ultimately, fostered the sense of an imaginary elsewhere. Since these engagements diverged from the predominant discourses, and the Soviet authorities often regarded them as dangerous for societal well-being, the affectively loaded practices and experiences of music guided the youth to redefine their relationship to the daily reality and ideology of Soviet life. Hence, the rock music milieu became the site in which certain affects (interest in rock music), affective states of mind (*kaif*) and expressions (practices of style, artistic languages) fostered the agency of the nonconformist youth by creating a space of sensory divergence.

*I was listening to the Beatles singing from the sky – really nice voices! It was like the voices of the Beatles, but not their song. Something much more beautiful. It was unbelievable.*

Vladimir Wiedemann

## Introduction

The hippie movement, which culminated in the U.S. with the legendary Summer of Love in 1967 San Francisco and the Woodstock Festival in 1969, had a lasting effect on the youth in the Soviet Union. Influenced by the limited knowledge about global youth movements and western rock music that leaked through the Iron Curtain, as well as being inspired by various spiritual traditions, a counterculture of flower children developed in the Soviet Union (see for example Risch 2005; Zhuk 2008; Mikailienė 2013; Wiedemann 2013; Fürst 2014; Toomistu 2017; *Soviet Hippies*, 2017). Asking a Soviet hippie how they had become a hippie would most often receive the simple response: “Through music.” With its power to create new social arenas and stimulate affective imagi-

naries and enactments that significantly deviated from mainstream society, rock music was the key source and the means of divergence.

In this paper I focus on the role of music among nonconformist youth in the late-Soviet period in Estonia. While I draw on sources of oral history and materials up until the early 1980s, the argument I propose considers specifically the narrow period between the late 1960s and mid-1970s. This coincides with the emergence of the Soviet hippie movement and precedes the era when rock music carved out its intermittently tolerated – if not actually promoted – position in the Soviet cultural milieu, as evinced by phenomena such as touring rock groups and the vinyl releases of locally produced as well as Western rock by the official Soviet record label Melodiya (see e.g. Cushman 1995). I regard the formation of the youth counterculture in Soviet Estonia as the simultaneous effect of external influences and the local socio-political context. While the hippie movement in Soviet Estonia manifested a global cultural flow of transnational origin, the particular socio-political context conditioned its distinctive enactments. These enactments produced a common ground for commu-