

Heroes of Russian Rock: Friends, Lovers, and Husbands
By Stingray

Despite what American society tried to teach me growing up - the wedding costumes, kitchen sets, and indelible Disney movies - I have always believed that it is better to be one of the guys than be with one of the guys. I have my mother to thank.

In Russia from early 1984 to 1996, she was just one of the dudes. No distinctions, no divides. Coming from Los Angeles, a land of cookie-cutter stereotypes and assumed gender norms, she loved emulating these gorgeous, witty, and artistic men – singing their harmonies instead of cooking them dinner and breaking bottles instead of hearts. The atmosphere was euphoric, the company divine.

Too many people assume that being the only girl in a guy's group overwhelms a woman with too much masculinity. Quite the contrary, Joanna Stingray never looked or felt more feminine than when she was sharing song lyrics and dirty jokes between them. She had so much more freedom to feel soft and gentle; gone were the stiff walls she'd built to hide her emotions and protect herself. None of the guys tried to impress her or put on pretenses, so she didn't have to either. It was something that was pure and in the moment, never restrained and never unsatisfactory. As she always tells it, men are at their best when they're in no position to disappoint you.

Being able to collaborate creatively with these guys fostered a relationship between my mom and these Russians where the interactions were not guided by confusion or subtlety that permeates societal expectations. Instead, the relationships were defined by understanding and acceptance. Each interaction was instinctual, not a man and a woman standing on opposite sides of a line but two humans smearing paint across canvases and rubbing their dirty hands over guitars and keyboards in a way that surprised and inspired the other. If the world had ended, they would have died doing exactly what they wanted to be doing. Imagine a world in which people don't pretend that they're so different.

If I'm being honest, there isn't a man or woman out there who wouldn't prize hanging out with the likes of Boris Grebenshikov, Kino, Sergey Kuryokhin, Kostya Kinchev, and all the others amazing rockers, artists, and poets in Russia. Yet my mom had the chance to witness so many missed opportunities where women would lay themselves at Boris' feet, terrified of his authority and his rejection to the point that they lost touch with who he actually was. Too many times she saw women idealizing him, not even realizing that by putting him on a pedestal they were pushing him farther and farther away from themselves. As they stared up at his far-off figure, my mom would slide into the room and tug him away to go and have the time of their lives.

Joanna's Russian guys and her had their own kind of what I like to call Mutual Admiration Society. She loved the strength of who they were, their confidence, cadence, and style, and they loved her passionate, mischievous attitude that could only flourish in a wild garden. At the end of the day, because nobody cared, they

were able to care that much more about each other. That comfortability and familiarity is the key ingredient to creating authentic art.

Nowadays there is a deeper divide than ever between men and women. We can view each other as the enemy, as separate sides, as means to an end, as something unknown and scary like a shadow in a doorway. Current events have created fears and expectations that mutilate our understanding of humanity and prevent many of us from being comfortable around the opposite sex. My mom's time in Russia, the bonds she forged and the consequent music she made, are a permanent reminder to me of how like us the other side can be, how all humans have the capacity to share feelings, inspiration, and friendship.

Boris was and is a shining light, pure, sweet, and a master poet in Russian and English. When my mom met him, he was a spiritual hippie with long blond locks and stunning blue eyes that made the city blush. Decades later, he wrapped me in a bear hug and gave me a silver ring that would sparkle over every key I played on the piano and make it impossible to stop.

Victor Tsoi had enormous charisma. He was magnetic. When he smiled, my mom swore she felt his kindness and warmth in a way that felt like an arm perpetually draped over her shoulders. He was funny and easygoing in a way that was effortless and sexy. My mom would have missed out on so much joy had she not spent hours laughing and dancing with him, their souls on fire and their songs pouring out of them.

Sergey Kuryokhin, with his thick, dark hair and puppy dog eyes, had a boyish seductiveness that transformed into occult genius. He and my mom would sit together with their legs and arms entwined like tree roots sucking in water. He was the Pied Piper of the group, the kind of person people followed anywhere and still felt like they were home. He was provocative and fearless in a way that made my mom believe she could do anything, just because he was willing to do anything with her. It proved that condemning a man was not the only way for my mom, or anyone, to feel empowered; it was by loving him that she drew strength, confidence, and song ideas.

Yuri Kasparyan is what my mom described as "The Adonis," not just because his body and face were perfection but because his mind was musical and his soul was pure and full. He was made of magic – calm, sweet, and strong – and he never, ever faltered. In my mind I can always see him hunched over his guitar in a boxy, dark apartment, a leader not in the way he dominated but in the way he encouraged me to imagine lyrics and sing along. With his dark hair falling over his acquired wrinkles, his masculinity became irrelevant and the pain or triumph that defined his music reflected my own.

Kostya Kinchev was like a black panther with his dark, thoughtful eyes staring into the human soul. He could reach the depths of a person's psyche in less than five minutes, but was more than ready to offer up his entire being to you in return. His presence was mesmerizing, evocative, and what one might describe as feminine, and he was crazy and ghoulish and bright in a way no one would associate with a masculine, authoritative figure. He proved to my mother that all men were not what she expected, and could exceed all expectations.

Fedor Bondarchuk was a creative wizard of a director. He exuded power, but the force of his artistic vision was always tapered by his trust and gratitude my mom felt he had for her. It's a balance I think people have forgotten was possible.

Gustav Gurianov was an artist in every sense. He transformed every street of St. Petersburg that he walked into New York's Madison Avenue. There was perfection and geometry in his face, but he was daring and playful too. Despite societal assumptions, he never wanted to capture a woman's attention - just her smile, the way her eyes crinkled, and the combat boots covering her ankles in his colorful paintings.

Timur Novikov had the most defined, expressive face of all. It was a work of art, animated by his surging, pensive energy. He saw the world as a design, and carried himself through it like he was sewing himself into the greatest tapestry of all time. A tapestry that he knew would be incomplete without all of us, including my mother and her songs into his spectacular paintings.

Afrika was the baby of the group, but his never-ending energy and ideas far outreached even the most weathered of souls. With his boyish, winking face, he could win over anyone. There were no rules Afrika couldn't break and no party where he wasn't at the center of it. When he threw back his head and howled, the world tilted on its axis, and my mother was inspired to turn chords into melodies. They fed off of each other like a hummingbird and a flower, providing comfort and color to cushion every creation.

Vitia Sologub was long and lean and constantly full of musical ideas that filled his body from his bones to his skin. He was always there, always ready, always wonderful. His nature was friendly and protective, a family man who could sing the shit out of his version of the Beatles', "Helter Skelter." When I met him he avoided my eyes, afraid to scare me with his looming frame.

Yes, there are men out there who are damned and dark and destructive. Yes, there are disadvantages to being a woman in a man's world. But yes, there is also still beauty in humanity, and dichotomous lines drawn between males and females are nothing more than unnecessary social constructions that in many cases prove right and in many cases prove wrong. Women should not be scared to be one of the guys, nor should they see it as a loss of power to be surrounded by the sharp sense of masculinity. My mother's Russian friends were and are beautiful souls independent of their broad chests and genitalia, people who made her and later me feel loved and supported for no other reason than the fact that we existed. They made the music relatable, understandable. What I never realized before I met them I am certain of now - existence is meaningless without those types of people, and art becomes unimportant without different perspectives and shared humanity.