

Egor (Igor') Fedorovich Letov, a Siberian singer-songwriter, poet, musician, sound producer, and graphic artist, was born 10 September 1964 in Omsk, USSR, and died 19 February 2008 in Omsk, Russian Federation. Letov is most frequently associated with his songwriting. He wrote and recorded nearly 600 songs, co-authorship excluded. However, in two periods of his life, between 1982-86 and 1994-97, he wrote mainly poems. Many of these were published in the collection *Stikhi* (*Verse*, 2003/2011). His main musical project, the band Grazhdanskaia oborona (abbr. Grob or GO, named after the Soviet school classes in civil defence) released roughly fifty full-length albums during its existence (1984-2008). As if this alone does not testify to Letov's artistic productivity, his combined side projects count another twenty-five releases (solo albums and recordings by his other musical projects Posev, Egor i opizdnevshie, Kommunizm, and others). In addition come concert albums, compilations, and albums by other artists produced and/or part accompanied by Letov.

The increasing awareness about Letov's work in the wake of his untimely death in 2008 has given rise to numerous publications, investigating and analysing his songs and poems. Amongst these, Orlitskii (2021) situates Letov's work firmly within Russian poetic modernism (following in the tradition of poets such as Kharms, Kruchenykh, and Vvedenskii), a quality which distinguishes it from Russian rock poetry in the traditional sense. This observation is complemented by differences from Russian Rock on the musical level. Egor Letov is regarded as the central figure in the Siberian punk movement of the 1980s and 1990s, a concept which demands at least two initial clarifications: Firstly, aesthetically, Siberian punk was based on home-grown ideas and interpretations to such an extent that it no longer compares directly to western punk culture. Secondly, this "movement" – initially barely a subcultural undercurrent – was brought about by dozens, rather than hundreds of individuals. In 2004, looking back at the early days of his artistic project, Letov stated:

For me rock 'n' roll is a movement, it's sex, drugs, party, happiness, it's a rock revolution. We didn't have any of that here. I tried to make it happen and did it on my own. It became a sort of autonomous revolution for myself. It's not a global thing, it's me, here, it turns out, insisting on the same values as my brothers in spirit on the fronts of 60s San Fransisco, of 70s New York. (Koblov 2021: 3)

This desire to learn about western counterculture, from Omsk (a distant Siberian military-industrial town of two million inhabitants), was influenced by Letov's older brother Sergei (b.

1956). A saxophone-player, avant-garde musician, and composer, Sergei Letov collaborated with key members of the Soviet cultural underground, such as composer Sergei Kurekhin (1954-96) and the Moscow art-punk collective DK. Through his brother, Egor gained access to veins of knowledge deep below the surface of Soviet society. Importantly, these veins contained a good mixture of western and native counterculture.

Prior to the birth of their youngest son Igor, the Letov family had moved to Omsk from Semipalatinsk (today: Semei, Kazakhstan). The hundreds of nuclear tests conducted at the Semipalatinsk test site during the 40 years of its existence affected the health of over 1,5 million inhabitants. It is likely to have caused the premature death of Letov's mother Tamara, a medic, and possibly Letov's congenital heart condition, which would claim his life at the early age of 43. Letov's first band, Posev (Seed), was founded in 1982 and in November 1984 changed its name to Grazhdanskaia oborona. The other key band member was Konstantin Riabinov (1964-2020), whose artist name "Kuzia Uo" in a true punk manner applied the Russian abbreviation for "mentally retarded". They knew on-stage performance would be denied them for years to come, but felt a band had to produce something to prove its existence. Thus, they immediately began recording their music. Committed to tape, their avant-gardist musical ideas soon morphed into a form of punk rock, an aesthetic suitable for Letov's lyrics, drawn as they were towards the darker or more profane aspects of being.

Rather than resorting to subtle ambiguities and clever metaphors, as was commonplace in Russian rock lyrics at the time, Letov's went straight in the face of his adversaries. The title song to Grazhdanskaia oborona's first album, *Poganaia molodezh'* (*Disgusting Youth*), celebrates the parental generation's stereotypes of decrepit youngsters, but this merely sets the framework for deeper and more personal probes into human existence. If the language, littered with vernacular expressions, slang and swearwords, openly disregarded Soviet conventions for the culturally acceptable, so did the vocals. Letov's voice demonstratively transgressed the acceptable register of expression for Soviet singers; crossing the border into spite, rage, desperation, and agony; and utilising shouts, screams, roars, wails, chuckles, and defiant laughter. Letov's song lyrics were from the very outset performance poetry, and throughout his career he would tirelessly warn about the reductionism involved in reading them from paper. Notably, as Orlitskii confirms, many of Letov's written poems also give priority to performative qualities.

By the mid-1980s rock music had gained a foothold in Moscow and St Petersburg, but in remote Omsk authorities took a less pragmatic view on “anti-Soviet activities”. The Andropov administration’s anti-rock campaign, launched in late 1983, made matters worse. With targets to meet, the Omsk KGB were not inclined to distinguish between young adults playing with subjective interpretations of western counterculture and a veritable ideological “terrorist cell”. In the autumn of 1985, they eliminated the perceived threat by sending Riabinov off to army service and committing Letov (his heart condition preventing conscription) to a mental hospital. Subject to heavy medication, which produced hallucinations and severe physiological and psychological side-effects, Letov defended his sanity during the months of hospitalisation by ceaselessly writing poems and stories. Some would later appear on his recordings, either read or as songs.

Following his release from hospital, Letov was, due to his political status, practically isolated from his peers. He realised that surviving the ordeal had made him stronger and began to see himself as a soldier of good, inspired by and responding to forces greater than himself. This informs the recurring soldier-, battle-, and war metaphors, which, alongside the motif of suicide, became lasting elements in his poetry. Omsk KGB went to great lengths to block any contact between local rock musicians and Letov. In spite of this, by spring 1987, the local band Pik i klakson managed to ease his creative isolation and provide him with rudimentary recording equipment. Shortly after, due to a rare combination of coincidence, cancellations, organisational error, and last-minute panic, Grazhdanskaia oborona made their stage debut at the Novosibirsk Rock Festival. The impact was notable, shock and scandal inevitable. In retrospect, Letov suggested that Siberian punk lasted only those twenty-odd minutes: Everything that followed was “mere post-punk” (Kushnir 1999: 348).

In his father, military professional Fedor’s flat, Letov set up a makeshift sound recording studio. Magnitizdat (magnetic publishing) was first used to record and distribute performances by the bard poets of the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the literary publishing practices of samizdat (self-publishing), which involved the copying of written texts, no legal limits were set for copying and distribution of recorded songs. With two reel-to-reel tape recorders, rock bands could record “studio albums”. The tape machines allowed recording on two separate tracks by a simple modification to the soundheads. By “bouncing tracks”, the first two tracks would be copied onto a single track on a second tape recorder, freeing the other track for the next instrument.

The slow-churning Soviet bureaucracy following the scandalous performance in Novosibirsk gave Letov a few weeks to record his songs, before he risked arrest and resubmission to the mental hospital. Between May and June 1987, he recorded no less than five albums in a rush of creative energy, playing all the instruments himself. He then packed his bags and left for Moscow together with Iana “Ianka” Diagileva, a prominent Siberian singer-songwriter in her own right. Until Letov’s family successfully convinced the militia to withdraw the warrant for his arrest, the two travelled the USSR together in the manner of Soviet hippies.

During his manic weeks of recording, Letov would manipulate the recording speed, playing the drums slowly, then speeding up the rhythm track significantly, before adding guitar and vocals. A home-made reverberation device was used to alter the sound, muddling together the separate instruments to a buzzing, churning whole. The rough and primitive result made a lasting imprint on Grazhdanskaia oborona’s sound. Contrary to the contemporary trend in Russian rock recordings, with strong emphasis on a centrally placed and clearly distinguishable singing voice, Letov’s sound stood out as deliberately bad: noisy, gritty, and in contrast to common rock aesthetics at the time, with words sometimes difficult to discern.

As the recordings were copied from master reel to reel, from reel to cassette, and from cassette to cassette, noise levels would increase further. Letov’s early audience were first exposed to his songs from such recordings. For the contemporary listener, well-trained in filtering out noise, the appalling sound quality added to the songs’ provocative novelty and Letov’s intense vocal delivery. The overall effect was unusual, but successful in transforming Letov’s tremendous artistic energy to the listener. During his frantic 1987 recording session, he recorded five albums – *Myshelovka* (*Mousetrap*), *Krasnyi al’bom* (*The Red Album*), *Khorosho!* (*Good!*), *Totalitarizm*, and *Nekrofiliia* – each containing 10-15 short songs. Upon hearing the result of his most recent creation, he would skip and jump around, brimming with pride and delight. The absence of such emotions upon finishing a work, he later suggested, would probably mean it has failed.

Preserving the energy and spontaneity in his recordings remained amongst Letov’s aesthetic priorities. With his arrest warrant lifted, Riabinov back from army service, and a stable line-up of musicians, Letov went on tour with GO in 1988. It was crowned with a performance at the VII Leningrad Rock Festival. Shortly after began the recording a new batch of four albums in

the Leningrad band Auktsyon's professionally equipped studio. Letov, unhappy with the result, took the recordings back to Omsk to finish them himself, determined to recover what he felt the sophisticated recording equipment had suppressed.

On the four albums *Russkoe pole eksperimentov* (*Russian Field of Experiments*), *Zdorovo i vечно* (*Vital and Eternal*), *Armageddon pops*, and *Voina* (*War*), the music left behind many of the warm references to Soviet evergreens, reggae and ska, prominent on the 1987 albums, and took the punk-rock elements from the same in a more aggressive, less melodious direction. This reflected the impact from the full four-man line-up's loud and chaotic live performances, and influence from the San Francisco punk scene. Simultaneously, the lyrics became politically radicalised and reached an anti-Soviet peak with songs such as the raging "Pesnia o Lenine" ("Song about Lenin"), where the founder of Soviet communism is equalled to Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. In other songs, cleverly manipulated slogans were combined with more finely-tuned poetic devices. An example of the latter is Letov's anthem to perestroika, "Vse idet po planu" ("All Goes by the Plan") from the eponymous album (1989), arguably GO's most famous song with the wider Russian public.

After 1989, Letov's creative output continued, but materialised in fewer new albums by GO. As the USSR approached the brink of collapse, GO's roar of anti-Soviet sentiment began petering out. Letov, uncomfortable with standing on the side of majority opinions, occupied himself increasingly with re-releases, live albums, various collaborative projects, and acoustic solo albums. In the latter, a first phase in his return to written poetry, diversity returned in force. The acoustic solo albums *Muzyka vesny* (*Music of Spring*) *I* and *II*, released under Letov's own name, and the fully electric albums released under the band name Egor i opizdnevshie (Egor and the Fucked-out [the English language struggles to accommodate explicit Russian past-passive participles, based on the c-word or otherwise]), show the full range of Letov's songwriting heading into the 1990s.

In 1994, alongside Sergei Kurekhin, Letov became deeply involved with Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party (NBP), as head of its cultural wing *Russkii proryv* (Russian Breakthrough). A provocative crossover between a political party and conceptualist art project, the NBP sought to unite the forces of the extreme left with those of the extreme right. Thus, Letov was seen rubbing shoulders with Limonov, future Kremlin ideologist Aleksandr Dugin, and notorious right-wing nationalist extremists. Whilst the NBP would grow to become the

largest unofficial youth organisation in the Russian Federation, Letov began distancing himself from the project already in 1996, possibly influenced by the untimely death of Sergei Kurekhin. In the same year, Letov declared his support for the RF's Communist Party in the national elections. A tongue-in-cheek over-identification with communist ideals is noticeable on Grazhdanskaia oborona's 1997 album *Nevynosimaia legkost' bytiia* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), opening a space for irony in true Letov style. Notably, the main achievement of GO's releases in 1997 was, according to Letov himself, the absence of a single clean note on any of them. (Koblov 2021: 199)

The political stunts of the mid-1990s would have serious implications for GO in the form of concert riots and cancelled tours. For young fans, the mere presence of Letov on a stage, be it with an acoustic guitar or a full band, was taken as an invitation to start stage-diving. Letov declared himself apolitical but remained naturally direct and outspoken. Established as a figure widely associated with provocative statements, the controversies surrounding his person never fully calmed down. Meanwhile, GO, its musical style settled, continued releasing albums at a more leisurely rate, and touring at home and abroad, including concerts in Germany (2000, 2002), Israel (1999, 2001, 2003, 2005) and the US (1999, 2005). In 1997 Letov had married Natalia Chumakova, who soon joined GO's line-up on bass guitar. In the 2000s, Letov's songs took on somewhat lighter and warmer sentiments than before. *Zvezdopad* (*Starfall*), an album with cover versions of songs by Soviet bard poets, appeared in 2002. In a steady stream of re-releases, appeared the new album *Reanimatsiia* (2005), a title hinting at Letov's heart condition. GO's last album *Zachem sniatsia sny?* (*Why are dreams dreamt?*) followed in 2007. In September, Grazhdanskaia oborona visited Norway for what would become their final concerts abroad. Egor Letov died in his sleep in February of the following year.

To sum up Letov's massive and diverse output is challenging. Letov had a first-hand experience with political persecution during his formative years. He also thoroughly educated himself, providing his own work with a rich potential for references. His song lyrics transcend the limits of their linguistic devices through their kinetic aspects, rhythm, and drive. Letov's lyrics frequently create the basis for musical rhythm: Sometimes a quick march, sometimes a snappy ska-reggae, sometimes a machine-gun staccato. The combination of rhythm, musical sound, and expressive vocals induces Letov's songs with a particular energy, characteristic of his work.

On this basis, Letov utilises a broad range of modernist poetic effects and devices: rhyme is used sparsely, if at all; metric patterns are set up to interact, contrast, or collide; shifts between poetry, prose-poetry and poetic prose are utilised to great effect. Letov indulges in conceptualist play with fragments of bleak or absurd everyday images and situations, or with political slogans and clichés. He cuts-and-pastes, quotes, paraphrases, and twists meanings. Meanwhile, a more deeply-situated voice of personal experience, resonates with the music, informing and enriching the images. All this is combined with a rich and vital vernacular Russian, generous amounts of explicit vocabulary, and occasional folkloric elements or neologisms. Finally, Letov applies a punk-inspired inverted aesthetics, where self-deprivation, vulnerability and worthlessness are embraced, even demonstratively celebrated. The loss of self as a meaningless cog in the machinery of society, self-sacrifice, even suicide (a fate suffered by many of Letov's own friends and fellow rock musicians) is de-mystified in this manner. Proofs of a cold, oppressed, violent, frightening, and meaningless existence are numerous, but the effect is not necessarily cold or hostile. Letov's inverted aesthetics permeate everything from the poor sound quality of his early recordings to the motifs and images of his lyrics. Its effect is energising and essentially cathartic, giving the listener strength to laugh in the face adversity. Like their author jumped and bounced about, intoxicated by their creation, his songs invite the listener to join the celebration.

Throughout Letov's career, far from everyone has accepted this invitation. His explicit language, fatalistic images, and noisy musical sound alienated many, even within the Russian rock community. Letov's political provocations and U-turns of the 1990s caused many fans and followers of his own generation to lose interest in his work at a time when his poetry-writing thrived. Instead, on board came inexperienced teenage fans, no better equipped to grasp the subtleties of Letov's work. Still, it is difficult to underestimate Letov's significance for Russian punk. Punk musicians across all ages and sub-genres readily acknowledge his influence, at least on some aspect of their artistic formation. Posthumously, evidence of a wider appreciation of Letov's work has emerged, reflected in projects such as *SimfoOborona*. On 11 February 2018, marking the tenth anniversary of Letov's death, the Omsk Philharmonic Orchestra performed a concert of instrumental versions GO songs, arranged for a full orchestra. This suggests his work has made a lasting imprint far beyond the rock and punk communities, and beyond specialist academic circles. Letov himself, however, voiced a somewhat bleaker view of his own impact:

[..] around here, nobody at all needed any of this whatsoever. Nobody even understands it or listens to it. Generally, the whole misfortune with our scene is that our people read nothing, don't know, don't listen, and don't see. And don't experience any need for any of that. (Koblov 2021: 3)

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