

How Russia's musicians are taking a stand against the war in Ukraine

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Speaking from outside the country a fortnight after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, Russian rapper Oxxxymiron [released a video message](#) saying that: "...there are tens of millions of Russians who categorically disagree with this war - and that should be said as loudly as possible". Oxxxymiron was announcing a series of charity anti-war gigs under the banner Russians against War (RAW).

The first concert in Istanbul on March 15 [raised](#) \$30,000 (£22,000) for Ukrainian refugees. The second concert, at London's O2 Shepherd's Bush Empire on March 24, [raised](#) \$50,000 (£38,000).

Oxxxymiron is just one of many Russian musicians who are using their platform to campaign against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Sergey Khavro is another. Khavro creates dreamy synth-pop under the name [Parks, Squares and Alleys](#). Writing on his Facebook page, Khavro said:

On February 24 Putin invaded Ukraine and turned his so-called 'special operation' into a massive genocide.

It was the last straw that forced me and my family to leave Russia immediately and start a new life in Georgia.

I'm not going to release anything new until this war is over.

All of my Bandcamp and Spotify donations are going to United Help Ukraine charity centre".

Other influential rappers such as Morgenshtern (who packed his bags in December 2021) and Face have also abandoned the country in protest. The latter [stated](#) he would never return to Russia and asked the Ukrainian people for forgiveness. But these are only a few examples of the many cultural producers who [have left](#) Russia in the past month. For how long, they don't know: abroad is for now a place from which they can articulate [dissent](#) without fearing state retaliation.

Even though their situation does not compare to what their [Ukrainian colleagues](#) are [experiencing](#), Russian musicians find themselves in precarious conditions that increasingly resemble [Soviet times](#). Once again, artists viewed as "inconvenient" are being relegated to the underground and the independent [cultural](#) landscape of Russia [is being eroded](#).

Hopelessness mixes with protest

Two years of COVID and now the war and its sanctions have crippled a music industry that in the

past years had tried to develop infrastructure internally and build bridges externally.

The thriving scene of the 2010s, which shaped an alternative community in Russia and offered a different version of the country abroad, feels like a faint memory. “We have lost everything”, [writes](#) music journalist Nikolai Redkin, and “those who haven’t left have no strength left in them to create anything”. Russia’s creative class, which for years had been the [most vocal](#) in contesting Putin, may take some time to regroup.

A mixture of hopelessness and protest makes it inappropriate to carry on with musical activities, and several musicians have cancelled their tours: this is no time to “distract” and “entertain you”, pop star Monetochka told her fans on [social media](#).

Boris Grebenshchikov, leader of the popular band Akvarium, has called off all his concerts until “[better times](#)”. Grebenshchikov, is often seen as Russia’s Bob Dylan and was blacklisted repeatedly during Soviet times for dissidence. Akvarium has been banned again for calling the war in Ukraine “madness”.

Mumiy Troll, one of Russia’s most influential rock bands of the past 30 years, have decided to go on an indefinite live [hiatus](#): “music went dead”, they communicated on Facebook.

Despite the new laws establishing [up to 15 years in prison](#) for the spread of “fake” anti-Russian propaganda, musicians [have taken a stand against the war](#) in various degrees. Some have used their social media channels, others have [joined](#) street rallies. Many have signed [petitions](#) urging Putin to [stop the war](#).

Others have contested what is happening through their art. Rock star Zemfira released a new video for the song *Ne strelyajte* (Don’t Shoot) while deleting everything else from her channel. By doing this she is deliberately highlighting images of the destruction caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine combined with the repression of anti-war demonstrations in Russia. Zemfira is now also [abroad](#).

The show must go on, but how?

But a question remains over those musicians who have so far stayed in Russia: if music is to continue, how should it go on? In the current climate, having an anti-war stance but then carrying on with musical endeavours as normal can be seen as hypocritical. The popular Petersburg band Shortparis, after releasing a video that many interpreted as a statement against the war, have now [announced their April tour](#) in Russia.

“We view our concert activity as an opportunity for unity of a certain community, the birth of a sense of solidarity and support within it,” the band said. But their Ukrainian audience was in outrage: “you turned out to be cowards”, commented one user. “Come play in Mariupol theatre” suggested another.

Nonetheless, musicians who have decided to continue with their activities argue that music functions as an emotional shelter in dark times and a tool for creating an alternative sense of belonging. “Music is a lifeline that pulls people out of trouble”, [said](#) the singer Alyona Shvets, “it will be even more difficult without music than with it.”

Especially in the independent scene, musicians are caught between a rock and a hard place. Even though many of them oppose the decisions of their government, they also need to resume their musical activities for economic reasons.

Live gigs are the main source of income for artists in the now shrunk Russian market. Payment systems such as [Mastercard](#), Visa and [PayPal](#), distributors such as [CD Baby](#), and streaming services including [Spotify](#) and Apple Music have halted operations in Russia, which complicates monetising from (and uploading songs to) music platforms for Russian musicians.

Warner, Universal and Sony, the three major labels controlling around 70% of the global music catalogue, [have also ceased or limited activity](#) in Russia. Moreover, touring abroad for Russian artists will be challenging now that the industry is [isolated](#). Once again, like in the 1960s-1980s, precarity in Russian musical labour derives from the state (not the market), its actions and ideology.

Overall, musicians and industry professionals know that something has been lost forever. Participants thought they could eventually succeed in protecting the scene they painstakingly built from within an increasingly authoritarian state. But that didn't happen. How far back the Kremlin is going to set the clock - whether to 40 years ago, or 90 - remains to be seen.

Marco Biasioli

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