

Flying over Russia

Even before Red Wedge had got started, we found out that earning a political reputation could bring unexpected results when, in the middle of 1985, we were invited to go and play in Moscow. Initially we were somewhat flummoxed. After all, it was a bit like the kind of thing my dad might have said: 'All right, if you want to be a bloody communist, why don't you all bugger off to Moscow!' We weren't sure that Moscow was where we wanted to be at all, but it seemed like too interesting an opportunity to pass up.

In July 1985, Moscow was hosting the 12th Festival of Youth and Students. 'I've never heard of that,' you may be thinking. 'What on earth was it?' Your guess is as good as mine, quite frankly. All I know is that there were 'delegates' from all around the world, representatives from youth groups, unions and political organisations, all there to have meetings and discussions and workshops and rallies. From each country there were also musical delegates, to perform at what was supposed to be a huge, week-long party. I may be wrong, but I think that the job of selecting Britain's musical representatives had fallen to All Trade Booking, the live-music wing of Rough Trade. And in their wisdom they selected Everything But The Girl and our natural musical allies, reggae band Misty in Roots.

Also on the trip with us was Sean O'Hagan from the *NME*, and I'm indebted to the piece he later wrote in the paper for any clear recollections of the trip at all. To say the experience was a strange one would be an almost criminal understatement.

Mikhail Gorbachev had only been in power for four months, and it was too early for his glasnost policy to have yielded any significant or noticeable changes. The country may have been poised on the brink of sweeping and radical reforms, but to our eyes it still seemed to be operating in an almost parodically oppressive manner.

For a start, Moscow seemed to have been cleared of all its inhabitants under the age of forty – anyone, in fact, who may have been interested in witnessing the appearance of some Western pop or reggae groups. There were dark rumours swirling around the city concerning the apparently forcible relocation of all its young people during this two-week period. Having believed, in our naivety, that we were coming to make some kind of symbolic connection with communist youth, we were confronted with the full, dreary daily reality of living in the Soviet Union. Nothing unexpected, or threatening, or even FUN! should be allowed to take place, if at all possible. We had been determined to bring back reports of a thriving society with which to deflect the 'Evil Empire' cliché current in the West in the mid-1980s, but blimey, they didn't make it easy. If the authorities had actually been in league with Ronald Reagan they couldn't have done much more to undermine our idealistic faith in the possibility that the Soviet Union was A Good Thing.

The whole trip was more or less a joke. We played gigs to rooms full of middle-aged party officials, went on sightseeing trips with clearly censored and near-mute translator-guides, were followed round our hotel and in the streets by anonymous-looking, green-suited men and were fed an enervating diet of watery cabbage. I'm not making this up. It was probably a mistake to have gone vegetarian just before we went (bloody Morrissey), but even so, the food on offer seemed almost comically frugal. Could it really be true that in a modern communist society there was nothing to buy in the shops, and nothing to do, and nothing good to eat? Well, er, yes, apparently.

In his piece for the *NME*, Sean described the incongruity of some of the gigs we played – the first one being in the Hermitage Gardens.

In the end, against all the odds, it sounded just fine and a little bit of history was made. Halfway through Everything But The Girl's set, the British contingent in the audience leave their seats and start dancing, to the astonishment of the staid, but appreciative, Russians present. The security guards scratch their heads, Ben and Tracey exchange a relieved grin and Nick Hobbs, who knows about these things, claims that this is the first time an audience in Russia has danced in the aisles ...

But it was downhill after this show. The next 'gig' we played was at the Olympic Village complex, up in the Moscow hills, where we performed alongside a German pomp-rock group called Enno and a Russian group, Zemliana (People Who Inhabit The Earth!). In between the band performances, two men sat on the stage and had a debate about 'music and the state'. Then we played at the Sovin Centre. Before we went onstage a magician performed, in top hat and tails, pulling doves out of thin air. Then a woman in a pink evening gown came on to introduce us, her long speech in Russian referring to two famous names of English pop: John Rotten and Tracey Thorn.

We all got extremely drunk every night, as did the entire population, apparently, because there was simply nothing else to do; and when even that palled, we set up our equipment in the foyer of the Hotel Cosmos one night and played an impromptu gig for anyone around. As it turned out, it was the best show of the whole trip, the only one remotely resembling what you might call a gig, with people smoking and drinking and actually enjoying themselves.

The last show was supposed to be a triumphant appearance in front of 12,000 people in Gorky Park, and we hoped it would make up for the preceding non-events. But it was not to be. Our set seemed to start out all right, and for once the equipment was of quite good quality and the audience could actually hear us at normal volume. Then fate dealt a cruel hand as the heavens opened and a torrential downpour began to soak the PA, which had been set up right at the front of the stage, unprotected by the overhead canopy. We'd only done four songs when we were told that we would have to leave the stage immediately or risk electrocution. It was a bitter blow.

That final failure was emblematic, really, of the yawning gulf between East and West at the time; the unpreparedness of the Russian organisers for the realities of staging the kind of pop events with which they simply had no familiarity. And our own unpreparedness for the true state of what was in reality a crumbling, hollow edifice of a society. We hadn't anticipated that, and didn't really know what to do with the information.

All in all, it was a dispiriting experience. Sure, there were some rowdy nights in the foyer of the Hotel Cosmos, and we discovered more varieties of vodka than we had hitherto suspected might exist, though getting hold of this vodka wasn't straightforward, as it had to be purchased during the day from a semi-secret location – a US hotel, was it? – and involved some complicated currency transactions, all of which seemed fantastical and farcical.

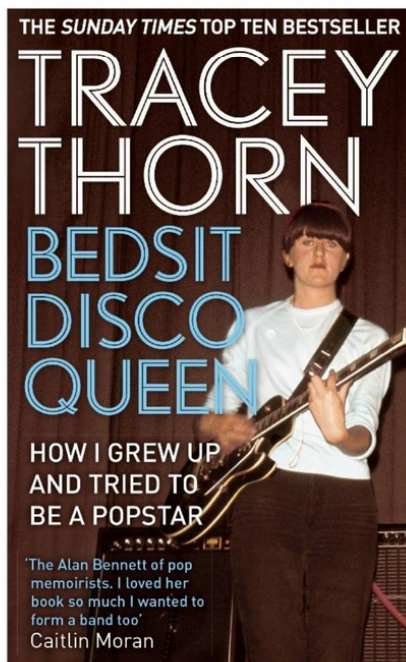
One of our party visited the famous GUM department store, hoping to choose a hat to take home as a souvenir, and made the discovery that there really was just the one hat to choose from. Ben and I learned that it was illegal to share a hotel room if you were unmarried, but got away with it anyway, half expecting each night to be dragged from our bed and arrested. Was it possible that our illicit relationship could send us to the gulag? Were there still gulags? We didn't know; we joked about these things, with no real concept of how serious any of it was, or how serious we should be about it. I felt anxious much of the time, while also feeling embarrassed about the anxiety. As if I was stereotyping an entire nation – more than one entire nation, in fact – even though it was behaving fairly stereotypically.

But the general feeling was one of discomfort. We were out of our element, and out of sorts. It was too much like a parody – someone genuinely did ask if they could buy Ben's Levi's – and also unreal, like going back in time, or through the looking glass. A Russian sound engineer told me I sounded like Patti Smith, and we had our photo taken in Red Square with Misty in Roots, plus an Aeroflot pilot and his young son who simply wandered over and asked if they could join in. But these events, in their strangeness, took on a hallucinatory and

vaguely threatening quality, like being in a dream over which you had no control and in which you could find no familiar landmarks.

The highlight of the trip, and the one moment when true human contact was made, was when we visited the flat of legendary Russian rock critic Art Troitsky, whose mother fed us garlic potatoes, salad, pickled cucumber and Glenfiddich whisky. We probably weren't supposed to be there; it was all a bit hush-hush, again in a way we weren't sure whether or not to take entirely seriously, but their hospitality was genuine and heart-warming, and crossed all the boundaries.





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