

Yegor Letov: 'Father of Russian punk'

For a Soviet musician thrown into a mental asylum by the KGB in the mid-1980s because of his anti-Communist lyrics, it was never the best idea, on release, to sing a song about Lenin "rotting in his mausoleum". But that is what the Siberian rocker Yegor Letov did, and it is partly why he was known as "the father of Russian punk" and "the Russian Sid Vicious".

As much as any musicians of the time, Letov and his cult group Graždanskaya Oborona ("Civil Defence"), widely known as GrOb – which is also the Russian word for "coffin" – could claim to have helped hasten the end of Soviet authoritarianism with first their niggling, later aggressive, often obscene and in-your-face defiance of Communist rule. Their lyrics and music were raw, direct and anarchic, ushering in the spirit of fast-changing times.

Before the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev eased censorship in the mid-1980s, which allowed rock bands to perform openly, GrOb's anti-Communist lyrics of rage and desperation were passed around first Siberia, then Russia, and eventually the entire Soviet Union in the form of home-recorded cassettes known as magnitizdat. These had a huge effect on disaffected youth, not least the song "Some Guy Got Killed by a Bus". Letov also performed and recorded with the band of his then-girlfriend, the Russian punk Yanka Dyagileva, until she committed suicide in 1991. He married Natalya Chumakova, the bass guitarist with GrOb, in 1997.

Ironically, Letov morphed into an odd blend of Communist-nationalist-Christian in post-Soviet Russia, a fact that turned off the newer wave of post-Cold War musicians. In the early 1990s, he was involved with the dissident Eduard Limonov in the founding of the National Bolshevik Party, since banned, merging his solo concerts with its rallies. Despite criticism of his apparent ideological turnaround, until shortly before he died his solo concerts, and those of GrOb, continued to sell out.

Siberia is not the place you first think of when you think of punk music, but that is where, in 1964, in the city of Omsk, Igor Fyodorovich Letov was born to a Russian army officer and a nurse. He opted for the first name "Yegor" when he began playing the guitar, at first influenced by western bands on records passed down to him by his elder brother Sergej, who became an avant-garde jazz saxophonist.

Yegor Letov formed his first band, Posev, in 1982, and began performing underground in Omsk, his gravelly bass voice mixing Siberian folk lyricism with rock- and punk-influenced riffs. Two years later, after he founded Graždanskaya Oborona in November 1984, his lyrics became increasingly political, bringing him to the notice of the KGB.

In late 1985 he was committed to a mental hospital, a tactic regularly used against dissident writers, and forced to take anti-psychotic drugs which, he said later, gave him spells of blindness. Released after three months, he was even more defiant, recording what would become perhaps his best-known song, "Everything's Going According to the Plan", which became a hugely popular anti-Soviet anthem.

After his transformation into a "nationalist-Communist" in the 1990s, Letov

upset many of his fans by rejigging the same song to have its lyrics taken literally, as a pro-Communist eulogy. More of the old-time fans were lost when he sang a song called "Motherland" and came out with a nostalgic album in 2002 called Meteor Shower, containing cover versions of children's songs from the Soviet era.

Phil Davison

Igor Fyodorovich "Yegor" Letov, musician and songwriter: born Omsk, Soviet Union 10 September 1964; married 1997 Natalya Chumakova; died Omsk 19 February 2008.