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**RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE REGGAE;  
A STUDY OF MUSICAL APPROPRIATION AND ITS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

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**Summary**

The vast majority of research pertaining to contemporary popular music in the Russian and Eastern European Studies academic disciplines has focused on the rock genre. Minimal attention has been given to the study of genres such as Russian-language reggae and its adjoining subculture(s), which provide a wealth of material regarding musical appropriation, post-Soviet identity, and political resonance in popular culture. This paper traces the development of Russian-language reggae, its influence, and its correlation with the counter-hegemonic resistance of post-Soviet youth.

**Keywords:** Russia, Eastern Europe, reggae, post-Soviet identity, subculture, underground reggae, mainstream reggae, 5'Nizza, Jah Division.

**Introduction**

Exclusively Russian-language reggae arose following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, although Soviet rock musicians did experiment with reggae sounds and embrace certain aspects of Rastafarian thought. The subsequent subculture that grew out of dedicated Russian-speaking reggae fans provided an alternate discourse to both the former Soviet regime and to the post-Soviet landscape which followed – a landscape of extreme poverty, abundant crime, and rampant corruption. Reggae music was calming, relaxing, and uplifting, but retained the important message of protest to its listeners.

Though it never achieved mainstream success, Russian-language reggae did gain an

enormous following across Eastern Europe. Then, in the 2000s, as a new rhetoric of patriotism and positivism entered the lexicon of Russian politics, one band managed to break into the pop charts and reach listeners the world over. 5’Nizza became instantly successful – but in its catchy tunes was once again a message which resonated amongst post-Soviet youth. It was a caution, a critique, of this new-found optimism and pride. Youth could once again relate – they were drawn to reggae as the symbiosis of a foreign music carrying a local meaning – a balance they understood and desired.

Reggae took on new meaning in the post-Soviet space – it was largely disassociated from its Jamaican roots, instead symbolising the struggle against the aforementioned poverty, crime, and the corruption of a distinctly post-Soviet landscape.

This is not to say, however, that Russian-language reggae was homogenous, or that its listeners responded to it in identical ways. On the contrary, two distinct strands emerge, which in the course of this paper shall be referred to as *mainstream* and *underground*. The mainstream is comprised of bands such as 5’Nizza – bands which infuse rock and roll, soul, funk, and other genres of music into their reggae songs. Though many musicians have experimented with reggae, especially those known as classic Soviet or Russian rock groups (e.g. Akvarium, Chaif), there are few which can be categorised as primarily reggae bands. The underground, on the other hand, have a much broader variety of musicians, but operate by mimicking as closely as possible their understanding of Jamaican reggae and Rastafarian culture – perhaps why they have limited success in the broader sphere, but are very popular within the Russian-language reggae subculture.

Many theorists have tackled the complex issues surrounding the concepts of context, of authenticity, and of consumption, which some utilising examples of musical genres such as blues or rock and roll to emphasise their arguments. This paper will provide a glimpse into the post-Soviet landscape, and into the opportunities reggae music provides for disillusioned Russian-speaking youth, regardless of whether they subscribe to the mainstream or underground strands of the genre.

## History

A thorough understanding of both the post-Soviet space and the Jamaican context is required before approaching a topic which studies their cultural exchange and appropriation. As reggae came through diluted channels into the Soviet Union, it is first crucial to establish the environment which provided the opportunity for reggae to develop within Russian-speaking musical communities.

Rock music proved to be the precursor to many subcultures which later formed on the basis of musical taste, and was itself appropriated, both into white popular cultural from its African American origins, and into the underground culture of the Soviet Union from the popular music of America and of the United Kingdom. It is through Soviet rock music that the appropriation process occurring in Russian culture is perhaps most visible. After the initial introduction of rock, it can be argued that, behind the Iron Curtain, it developed quite independently from Western influence. As explain Ramet et al., “when rock music first sprouted in Soviet soil in the mid-1960s, it was largely imitative of Western rock...but rock music provided the essential underpinning for an emergent youth counterculture that has become stronger and much more heterogeneous over the years” (1994). Polly McMichael adds that “Soviet rock songwriters were deeply concerned with the difficulties involved in adapting rock music – a form they perceived to be ‘foreign’ in its very essence – to the demands of their own culture” (2008). This adaptation, however, is necessary in order to make a musical genre appealing for a localised audience, and “Western technoculture is not simply a culturally dominating or homogenising force...rather, it is almost always being actively manipulated by local cultures and rearticulated for new uses within these other cultural spaces”

(Berry & Miller-Pogacar, 1995).

Though Russian-language rock music grew to overshadow the popularity of its American and British influences (in the Russian-speaking cultural sphere), it still borrowed greatly from its Western rock counterpart. Indeed, through Western rock, subgenres of rock were introduced – jazz rock, blues rock, reggae-infused rock all followed.

The context in which reggae initially arose is crucial for the understanding its inherent traits, particularly when utilised in its original form – that of protest music. Because reggae songs were largely political and vocalised protest to the government in Jamaica, it would initially appear that there wasn't much of a market for them outside of Jamaica's borders. However, as argue Stephen A. King et al. in *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*, “U.S. record companies successfully marketed reggae as a new ‘rebel music’ in hopes that it would appeal to white American college students and European youth” (2002). The success of marketing spread Jamaican reggae globally, with reggae groups being formed all over the world. A certain set of stereotypes became associated with reggae, and both foreign as well as local Jamaican groups exploited them to attain a presumed authenticity. Due to the popularisation of reggae and the Western rock groups which incorporated reggae into their sound, the genre reached Russian-speaking countries, already laden with associations and stereotypes, which nonetheless assisted in the construction of a recognisable subculture.

It is through the medium of music, particularly a music which offers a community, that the quest for authenticity is most likely to occur. The formation of such subcultures in Russian-speaking countries is described by Michael Urban as “one effort to forge community amid the social debris littering the country's post-Communist landscape” (2004). In this landscape, underground Russian-language reggae was born, and presented the public with what Urban calls “new forms of social interaction”. When faced with two very different, yet equally detested, political ideologies, some sought an escape, and found solace in Rastafarian thought. Because music, as claims Timothy Rice, “can act as both a critique of the existing world and as an imaginary construction of a new and perhaps better world” (1996), reggae became the medium through which such thought entered public consciousness.

It is precisely the subculture, and that subculture's positioning against the political hegemony, that can create authenticity for its followers. As emphasises Dick Hebdige in other examples of subculture, “The raw material of history [can] be seen refracted, held and ‘handled’ in the line of a mod's jacket, in the soles on a teddy boy's shoes” (2002 [1979]). Though Hebdige limits his analysis to youth in the British working class, he nonetheless illustrates an important feature of the reggae subculture: they are able to recognise one another, and are recognisable to those outside of their community. They symbolise, through style, their subversion to the societal norms. After all, as claims Thomas Cushman, “Discussions about the authenticity of culture often hinge on the issue of music's relation to specific and economic forces in society” (1995).

Music, regardless of cultural origin, is a medium through which the youth of any race, in any country, of any heritage or culture, are able to experiment, develop their identities, and convey their own messages. Reggae is a genre which can be *transformed* by youth in a context other than the one in which it arose, in order to suit the needs of their own specific communities, whether that be limited to smaller subcultures or on a national scale. As explains Simon Jones, “For, time and time again, white youth have found in black music a more realistic and resonant account of their own experiences than established idioms of cultural expression could offer” (1988).

The reggae subcultures which were formed in Russian-speaking countries relied on this ability to reconstruct meaning in a musical idiom, and to reinterpret the genre to resonate with their

identity and social landscape. Reggae, entering the Russian-language cultural sphere through diluted streams, was developed into a culturally relevant product, and consumed by youth in different ways – either as the basis for a community, or as a form of expression.

### **Mainstream Reggae – 5’Nizza**

Arguably one of the contemporary Russian-speaking world’s most beloved bands, 5’Nizza was also the first group to achieve mainstream success playing almost exclusively reggae content. Though several of the classic Soviet rock groups experimented with reggae sounds, the genre never attained much mainstream airplay. 5’Nizza – formed by two young musicians from Kharkov, the Ukraine – was able to break through the pop-dominated music charts, conquering the hearts of pop-listeners, as well as simultaneously appeal to fans of classic Russian-language rock.

The two musicians comprising the group, Andrei Zaporozhets and Sergei Babkin, were both born in Kharkov, which, at the time of their birth and childhood, was still a part of the Soviet Union. Although following the dissolution of the USSR Ukraine attempted a revival of its national language – Kharkov, close to the Russian border, remained largely Russian-speaking. Both musicians pertain to the generation of post-Soviet youth, growing up in the former territories and republics, attempting to define and distinguish themselves in a post-Soviet landscape.

Their unique positioning of being both within the Russian context and simultaneously outside of it provides them with the opportunity of being able to – even encouraged to – critique it freely. 5’Nizza came into existence in 2000, a timeframe which, in Russia, correlates to Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, continuing terrorist attacks in response to the wars in the Caucasus region, and an unprecedented growth of well-being. It is perhaps due to their external stance that the band was able, during this time, to provide a critical voice of the patriotism sweeping the Russian nation, appealing to a new generation of young Russians equally skeptical of the new government and the ongoing conflicts they were forced to endure. Indeed, it appealed to this generation of post-Soviet youth – those unable to make sense of the rapid changes occurring in their countries, and turning to music – to words, to styles, to feeling – in order to more accurately express their emotions, and their identities.

The band’s biggest and most well-known hit, is, arguably, the song *Ja Soldat* (I am a Soldier). It was released as a single in 2002 and, as claims Kharkov native Ruslan Solomyaniy, 23, “conquered the hearts of many – even those who did not listen to reggae bands began to listen to *Ja Soldat*”. Scrolling through the comments section of its fan-posted Youtube video, it is evident that the song has spread throughout the world. In fact, the amount of comments left by Polish listeners exceeds even that of the Russian or Ukrainian speakers, and fans from destinations as far as Australia, China, Brazil, and Algeria show their appreciation. Many admit to not understanding the words, yet enjoy the melody and charisma of the musicians.

Simon Jones argues that “reggae’s unique effectiveness, however, lies in the dynamic interplay between *both* these, verbal and non-verbal, modes of communication and their distinctive fusion into an organic musical whole” (1988). It is 5’Nizza, in *Ja Soldat*, which conforms to the demands of reggae in this sense, in the ability to appeal to a global audience based on the song’s melody and their own appeal as performers, and to a more localised audience based on these same factors in combination with relevant lyrics.

Those who understand the words are more likely to understand the context – mandatory military service was still required by both Russia and the Ukraine. Additionally, at the time of the song’s release, Russia was reeling from the effects of its Second Chechen War – a war which

claimed the lives of thousands. It is therefore unsurprising that the young generation of Russians, Ukrainians, and their close neighbours, could identify with the lyrics – words about the difficulties, the futility, the pain – of warfare. Comments on the video included several from Eastern European soldiers, all begging to stop the fighting.

Another of 5’Nizza’s popular songs, *Jamayka* (Jamaica), invokes a mythical Jamaica – one of happiness and a carefree life. A listener on the song’s Youtube video page analysed the text as “a satirical song about Communist realities”, in which Jamaica represents the dream of freedom, of escape. In the years that followed the break-up of the Soviet Union, it could be argued that life was far worse than under the old regime – even more corruption, violence, and poverty were commonplace as countries sought to come to terms with their new capitalist system. Therefore, even into the 2000s, listeners could identify with such a song – one in which there is a dream of a better life, a better future – away from the harsh realities of either the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet spaces. It is symbolic that a song like this should come in 2001, a year after Vladimir Putin assumed presidency, pledging to restore order, and beginning a campaign of reviving Russian nationalism. As an external voice, 5’Nizza was able to see through this patriotism and appeal to a young audience who remained dissatisfied with their living conditions and yearned for a happier, peaceful, and relaxed future. These young fans could empathise with the protagonist of *Jamayka*, who has no past, no belongings, and is alone – searching for a home. They, likewise, were deprived of their Soviet past, starting almost anew in a new political regime and system.

It would hence appear that 5’Nizza’s songs, in addition to their catchy rhythms and melodies, contain a deeper meaning for their local audiences. As writes Sabrina Petra Ramet of Soviet rock, “in the republics of the former USSR both the rock musicians and their listeners seem to place a greater premium on the words” (1994). Though a lot of Russian-language pop songs seem to be devoid of a real, deep, collective meaning, the songs of 5’Nizza differ – which is perhaps why they were not only popular amongst the fans of popular music, but also attained a classic status amongst listeners of the rock genre, typically considered more serious. The sentiment of lyrics having a deep imprint on their listeners is summed up by Ramet: “Music brings people together and evokes for them collective emotional experiences to which common meanings are assigned” (1994).

During the Soviet Union, Western culture – and particularly music – was able to infiltrate the Iron Curtain and become popular amongst the youth, who viewed it as a means of protest against the Communist regime. When the USSR collapsed, Western culture was often held up on a pedestal, as something for which to strive – but, over time (and possibly under the influence of Vladimir Putin’s nationalism-revival agenda), this became more of a synthesis of existing influence of the post-Soviet space and contemporary post-Soviet structures with the interpretations of this Western culture. Russia and her close neighbours developed their own popular culture, which, as claims Adele Marie Barker, “like Russia itself...finds itself torn between its own heritage and that of the West” (1999).

Mainstream reggae is the embodiment of this new popular culture – able to infuse elements of reggae into existing musical practices with which the audience can identify (ie. the lyrics). Therefore, a song of peace and protest against war becomes a *reggae* song of peace and protest against the war, becomes a *Russian-language reggae* song of peace and protest against the war – a song which can be played the world over and enjoyed, yet a song which resonates in the hearts and minds of its local audience.

Thomas Cushman argues that ““Culture is an externalization of internal feelings, thoughts, and states of consciousness in objective forms which are then shared by other individuals” (1995). Russian-language reggae emerged, as a cultural object, from the contested and renegotiated identities of the post-Soviet era. It is important to emphasise that though the Soviet Union was transformed

into the post-Soviet space, it itself played a large role in the production of new popular culture. Soviet signs, symbols, themes, histories, and culture were reinterpreted in order to provide a means by which to understand the hectic surroundings of post-Soviet life.

5’Nizza played a role in this process by performing a reggae version of the infamous anthem of the Soviet Union, a version which was hailed by fans (from all countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain) as brilliant – several going as far to declare that all the atrocities of the Soviet regime could have been forgiven had 5’Nizza’s song been the official version of the anthem. Numerous listeners who left comments on the Youtube video highlight that it is the easy flow of the melody, the reggae sound, which is responsible for the sense of peace they derive from the song.

5’Nizza’s whole persona reflects a carefree, relaxed attitude typically associated with global reggae. If one was to mute the sound and merely watch 5’Nizza’s performance in any of the videos of the three songs mentioned in this chapter, it would be difficult to ascertain which genre they were singing in. 5’Nizza’s manner of performance and their style of dress is not that which is commonly perceived to be reggae – they very rarely even reference the symbols purported to be benchmarks of any reggae performer, instead dressing fairly casually (if a little eccentrically), and forgo dreadlocks for shorter haircuts. It would be inaccurate to accuse 5’Nizza of cultural assemblage in their selection of the more eccentric outfits as they are undoubtedly aware of the stereotypes prevailing in reggae music, and consciously choose to avoid them. It is perhaps this unwillingness to conform to any standards or norms in their chosen genre that pushed 5’Nizza into the mainstream.

### **Underground Reggae – Jah Division**

At the forefront of the underground Russian-language reggae movement is undoubtedly the Cuban-born Gera Morales, front-man of Jah Division, who claims to have been fathered by a Cuban revolutionary – a comrade of Che Guevara himself. Though Morales could not initially play reggae, and admits he was assisted by several African students, he has become something of a cult figure in the Russian-speaking reggae subculture. Active since 1991, Jah Division are also one of the oldest Russian-language reggae bands on the scene. It would be wrong to claim that the band completely shied away from or was ignored by the mainstream media, but they are much more well-known and respected within their own subculture.

Morales performed his first reggae concert in 1988, though only established Jah Division after the collapse of the Communist regime. He became the inspiration for others to follow. Like the Russian blues community described by Michael Urban, the Russian reggae subculture has “found in the music a set of coded responses to its turbulent surroundings, amounting to a stance that puts distance between itself and an inhospitable world” (2004). Indeed, preaching Rastafarianism, praying for peace and kindness, the Russian reggae movement was the antithesis to the post-Soviet landscape – a scene of violence and chaos.

Yet it is in this acceptance of Rastafarianism, in the appropriation and reinterpretation of Rastafarian thought, that Russian reggae musicians often go astray. As claims Viktor Sorokin, a reggae enthusiast who has travelled to Jamaica and is aware of both Jamaican and Russian-language forms of reggae, “It is difficult to translate music, because essentially what you are trying to achieve is the translation of culture”. He is suggesting that, as music is invariably linked, through its history, with the culture from which it arose, an accurate appropriation of the music is based on the accurate understanding of and engagement with its cultural sphere.

Underground Russian-language reggae seeks to emulate what they perceive to be both the musical style and the lifestyle of Rastafarian reggae artists. That is, they discuss the concept of

Babylon in interviews, reject consumerist superficiality and the current political system, and attempt to stay as true as possible to what they consider to be “authentic” reggae, albeit making it accessible for a Russian-speaking audience. The problem is that such claims and behaviours rely on certain assumptions and presumptions about Jamaica, Rastafarians, and reggae itself. For example, how precisely is the concept of Babylon interpreted by the Russian-speaking reggae milieu? From interviews given by prominent underground bands such as Jah Division, the most popular interpretation is that which is most common world-wide: Babylon as the police.

Russian police, as well as the police forces in other former Soviet republics, have a reputation for being harsh and corrupt, which solidifies their mentality as being in opposition to the Russian Rastafarians. However, this particular interpretation is very limited in scope of what Babylon represents to, for example, religious Rastafarian groups in Jamaica. This is just one instance of how Russian-speaking artists appropriate a specific cultural understanding of terms unfamiliar to them, then restructure them to suit their own needs and purposes.

In addition to being selective about the terms which they appropriate, underground Russian-language reggae artists and fans are also selective in regards to the discussion of what constitutes “authentic” reggae – in fact a far broader debate hinged on reggae’s position as one of Jamaica’s chief exports. It is perhaps for this desire of authenticity that musicians within the subculture, such as Morales, need to establish their roots as Cuban, need to make claims of being related to a Russian Rastafarian theorist – in order to justify themselves and to appear as genuine as possible. It is undoubtedly with this in mind that Jah Division’s website’s homepage proclaims Morales a “Russian Bob Marley”.

Though oftentimes trying to remain relevant to their particular local context, many of the underground Russian-language reggae bands still fall under the category which Stephen A. King et al. define as “pseudo-Rastafarian groups, who [imitate] the cultural trappings of Rastafari – the dreadlocks, the ganja smoking, and the lingo – without embracing its larger religious and ideological tenets” (2002).

Even if some members of the communities centred around reggae music and Rastafarian culture in Russian-speaking countries did attempt to mimic their chosen genre “authentically”, their perception of what constitutes authenticity remains contested. Viktor Sorokin claims that Jamaican reggae, originally, “...was about war, the war that must occur to fight for equality”. He continues that, “Reggae is the music of Jamaican poverty and of religious fundamentalism. The main idea of reggae is repatriation – the desire to rejoin Africa. Such black radicalism has no equivalent and no context in Russian realities.” However, this is a purist view, based entirely on the *origins* of reggae, and fails to take into account the transformation that the musical idiom has undergone – reggae which is not tied to Rastafarian fundamentalism, which is separated from its religious roots and is instead reflective of other shared experiences is not necessarily inauthentic.

It can, however, be argued that even the music currently being produced in Jamaica is not authentic, as after this musical genre became popular outside of Jamaica, it became the country’s largest export and is often unrelated to these shared experiences of the local populace – instead intended to find an audience globally. Viktor Sorokin argues that “popular reggae (outside of Jamaica) is when reggae loses touch with its roots – it becomes a tourist industry”. But if this is the music that Russian-language reggae artists listen to, and believe to be authentic, their own music, inspired by this popular reggae, becomes inauthentic in regards to the original intentions of Jamaican reggae.

Numerous non-Jamaican musicians, including Eastern European reggae fans and artists, come to Jamaica to record reggae songs, and Jamaican reggae spreads globally. In this scenario, the

production processes involved in creating reggae are now exploiting a musical expression previously intended only as a form of protest, as a form of mass information – except instead of being a music of protest or of information, it becomes commercial, and is hence altered, given a more global message which can appeal to a wider audience. Since a large portion of reggae music is specifically manipulated with the intention of export and profit, its authenticity, and by relation, the authenticity of those who seek to emulate it, is undermined.

Yet, regardless of what Russian-speaking musicians consider authentic reggae and the styles they associate with it, the process of selection is always present in their appropriation. More importantly, the emphasis placed on the motifs outlined by King et al. is far greater than any concepts relating to ideology or religion, unless they are mentioned in passing as another stake on authenticity.

Marijuana, dreadlocks, and the colours of the Ethiopian flag immediately come to mind when thinking of reggae. These are the predominant symbols which are associated with both reggae and Rastafari around the world, having been given such symbolic status by production companies marketing reggae to a largely white, middle-class, Western youth. As the musical appropriation spread to countries of the former Eastern European Communist Bloc, these symbols were, in turn, taken up by Russian-speaking musicians interested in this new musical genre. Watching Konstantin Borr's documentary film entitled *Raduga* (2004), which displays key groups within the underground Russian-language reggae scene at concerts, and includes interviews with prominent figures associated with the movement, it is evident that these are precisely the elements most musicians and their followers have appropriated.

In the music video to what is arguably Jah Division's most famous and most well-known song, *Cubana*, all the motifs mentioned are referenced. Cannabis leaves, red, black, gold, green, dreadlocks, Bob Marley, smoking marijuana – it appears as if each symbol was thrown into the video at random, attempting some sort of unity, some sort of authentication, justification, for its chosen musical genre. Though the lyrics hold a deeper meaning, a vocalised protest against the socialist regime in Cuba, the refrain interrupts to sing, “Cuba-Cuba-Cubana, legalise marijuana”. Another point of interest in the lyrics is the reference to an imagined Jamaica, a land in which, supposedly, everyone dances, smokes cannabis, is a Rastafarian, and sings reggae – all contrasted against the miserable portrayal of Communist Cuba.

Though many divisions and conflicts have formed between Jamaican Rastafari since their emergence on the world arena, the most grounded, religious, and traditional Rastafari have come to view the reggae phenomenon as a distortion of their beliefs and intentions. As write King et al., “according to the sociologist Yoshiko S. Nagashima, some Rastafarians found it ‘intolerable’ that the ‘distorted artificiality’ of international reggae was ‘accepted as genuine’ by so many listeners” (2002).

### **Comparative Account**

Though the underground reggae scene continuously invokes concepts such as Babylon, it is arguably bands like 5’Nizza which prove to be more conspicuously political, challenging the ideologies they witness being popularised in their own local landscape. Mainstream reggae manages to successfully blend western sounds with a post-Soviet understanding, and offer in the post-Soviet context what Thomas Cushman attributed to Soviet rock music – the act of being “not simply a static cultural object [...] produced and consumed, but an active code of resistance and a template which [is] used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity in the Soviet

environment” (1995).

Mainstream and underground reggae, though diverse strands and quite separate from one another, still maintain a relationship based on a mutual regard for reggae – however differing their views may be. After having been introduced to reggae by the mainstream version popularised by widespread radio play, if a listener is sufficiently intrigued, they may continue to discover the genre and subculture through less well-known, more underground musicians. Yet it is precisely the underground reggae which originally provided a platform for the development of that which would later become mainstream reggae.

Both streams likewise have similar goals, arising in environments when an alternative, or at the very least a critique, is demanded by youth dissatisfied with their current way of life and in opposition to the ideologies circulating the political sphere. Underground reggae, which arose immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, parallels the reception of blues, which Urban describes as “...performers, fans, and promoters who have adopted this particular foreign musical idiom and found in it a template for fashioning and making sense of their lives during a period of certain convulsion and routinised uncertainty” (2004). The Russian-language underground reggae subculture community, like the Russian blues community described by Urban, have created a culture – a culture in that it is “an externalisation of internal feelings, thoughts, and states of consciousness in objective forms [then] shared by other individuals” (Cushman, 1995). Joining a subculture became an escape from the mundane and unsatisfactory reality of post-Soviet life for the many young musicians and listeners who subscribed to reggae.

Likewise, mainstream reggae appeared on the music scene at yet another turning point of social circumstances, one in which life was supposedly improving and the former Soviet republics could once again be proud – proud of their individual and combined histories, achievements, and cultures. Yet in Russia, the new president’s rhetoric of optimism and patriotism evoked suspicion in many critics. Critique came in numerous forms: independent newspapers, art, literature, *music*. Musicians began to criticise the country’s new rhetoric, which they felt was obscuring the real issues facing Russia and, due to Russia’s proximity, her neighbours.

The parallel of reggae and blues in Russian-speaking environments is not limited to their growth during changing social circumstances and conditions, but rather extends into the very essence of the music’s development and the subcultures formulated around it. Reggae, like blues, must, when appropriated by Russian-language musicians and translated or re-imagined for a Russian-speaking public, go through a process of selection. This selection requires “seizing on some features of the music while neglecting or screening out others” (Urban, 2004). This begs the question: what attracts Russian-speaking musicians to reggae in the first place? Some researchers have argued that Jamaican reggae represents the essential human struggle – the expression of opposition – which resonates internationally. However, Russian-language artists cannot take Jamaican reggae and expect it to accurately express the exact same messages they feel are relevant to their protest and to their country of origin, so reggae must undergo a transformation.

However, it is imperative to stress that reggae is not being appropriated in its “original” or “authentic” form, one which is rumoured to exist if sought with dedication, but rather has again, like blues, “crossed the country’s frontiers with considerable baggage in tow...within the imported music a certain statement on authenticity has already been inserted, one acquired during the music’s travel through American and British youth cultures decades prior to its arrival in Russia” (Urban, 2004).

Those reggae groups which are more overt in their demonstration of this cultural baggage, groups which mould and fuse a variety of genres into catchy songs – songs which appeal to a mass audience – are often viewed by their underground counterparts as being inauthentic, or, more

dramatically, as not being reggae at all – as being “hippie music”. Fans subscribing to the reggae subculture are more likely to seek authenticity in their musical genre of choice, making judgements on what does or does not constitute this authenticity – embodying Cushman’s assessment that “a major site of struggle both between societies and within societies is the arena of competing definitions over the identities of a whole range of cultural products” (1995).

Urban highlights the division of Russian blues in a way similar to the division of mainstream and underground reggae present in this paper, claiming that “[Russian blues musicians] who have developed repertoires that include a few crowd-pleasing rock or pop songs often experience the censure of others in the community who regard their efforts as a vulgarisation of musical standards” (2004). It is evident that while groups such as 5’Nizza, who enjoy mainstream success, occasionally collaborate with other musicians, these musicians come from a distinctly different background than the underground reggae artists who have instead formed their own close-knit community, and would undoubtedly debate whether or not 5’Nizza can be defined as reggae.

Mainstream and underground reggae, though operating in separate cultural spheres, often with separate production and fans, do still share a number of important characteristics. Developed on the basis of exchange and indirect influence, the two distinct strands approach similar issues in different ways. Yet the necessity of confronting these issues – issues concerning the post-Soviet space, of the alienation felt by their fans and by the musicians themselves, issues of critique and protest and a perceived alternative to the post-Soviet cultural and political hegemony – are shared.

### Conclusion

This paper has traced the origins of Russian-language reggae – from its tentative roots in Soviet rock, to an established subculture following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and finally to a hybrid of popular music and reggae. It has identified two distinct strands of Russian-language reggae – the underground and the mainstream – who differ in their perspectives regarding reggae, appealing to different audiences, and utilising the genre for individual purposes. Because the two strands diverse and approach reggae in separate ways, they are faced with their own complex engagements with audience, context, and authenticity.

In the study of the appropriation of Jamaican reggae by Russian-speaking musicians, the paper focused predominantly on the methods by which these artists have attempted to translate reggae for a Russian-speaking audience, and how they perceive certain cultural motifs and reinterpret them in their own context. It would appear that the mainstream place a greater emphasis on the *meaning* of their words – meanings which are related to *their* context, as opposed to the Jamaican context numerous underground reggae musicians are occupied with invoking. The underground, on the other hand, hold a greater regard for the cultural symbolism of the music they are producing – familiarising themselves with the histories of the reggae and Rastafarian motifs.

Whilst both the underground and the mainstream do engage with their local and national contexts – whether that be intentionally or as a by-product of where they are situated – they differ in the audience they actively attract. Mainstream musicians such as 5’Nizza produce and perform music which is accessible to everyone – their songs, while imitating reggae to a degree, cannot always be categorised exclusively as reggae music. Underground, on the other hand, appeal to a far more niche audience – an audience which *recognises* the cultural objects – the appropriated reggae symbols: cannabis, dreadlocks, etc. – and can actively engage with them, forming a subculture of like-minded individuals, constructed on the foundation of mutual interest. However, regardless of how closely Russian-speaking musicians attempt to mimic reggae, there remains the question of

authenticity.

One of the reggae fans interviewed for this paper, Viktor Sorokin, argued that Russian-speaking reggae musicians and the Russian-language reggae subculture cannot possibly understand reggae – “there is a lack of context as to why they choose the reggae form – most Russian reggae does not contain the original function of reggae, that of political information being conveyed through song because the official government media is not to be trusted – Russian reggae is infantile, it is hippie music, it is mere escapism”. He rejects Russian-language reggae entirely, believing it incapable of authentically translating Jamaican reggae.

Yet both forms of Russian-language reggae, the mainstream and the underground, can be either political or escapist – they operate in their cultural context, like the punks Dick Hebdige describes – the ones who “appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms” (2002 [1979]). Underground reggae in the Russian cultural context became a reflection of the post-Soviet space – it provided both an escape for those who sought it, and appeared as a manifestation of the political and cultural crises experienced by the post-Soviet youth. Likewise, the mainstream reggae arose to critique the positivist rhetoric of Vladimir Putin’s Russia – or, once again, to provide an alternate universe – an escape.

As claims Abraam Iusfin, “The understanding of music mainly as an aesthetic factor must be replaced by a qualitatively different one – that of an *environmentally formative force*” (1995). Russian-language reggae, in either of its strands, provided its listeners with that which they desired, be that escapism or a political critique – that very same translation of political information which is intended for authentic Jamaican reggae to contain and convey to its audience.

Like Soviet and Russian rock musicians, who took a foreign idiom and re-interpreted it, restructured it, made it their own, suitable to their personal requirements – Russian-language reggae musicians have created a genre. It is not simply reggae in Russian-speaking countries, it is *Russian-language* reggae, a distinction which, with all of its own problems of authenticity or lack of authenticity, has nevertheless pervaded the Russian-speaking cultural sphere and provided a number of disillusioned post-Soviet youth with an identity and a voice.

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