

By Sergey Chernov

Pussy Riot packed the room at Tallinn Music Week late last month, while the public listened attentively until the very end even though they did not play any music, but rather spoke about the current political situation and protest movements in Russia and recent events in Ukraine.

The annual music industry conference and festival took a look at the roots of rock and roll, which largely started as manifestation of freedom and independence.

Announced six days ahead of the festival, Pussy Riot's appearance summed brought events full circle from March 2012, when Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves became the first international politician to demand the release the group's members, who had been arrested earlier that month.

Two years later, Ilves met with Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina in person after they had served nearly 22 months of the two-year sentences they received for an anti-Putin performance at Russia's main Orthodox church, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

Opening the festival as he does every year, Ilves — perhaps the world's only president with a competent knowledge of and sincere love for rock music — stated that freedom and rock and roll went hand in hand, and set the tone for the event as a celebration of freedom of expression.

In his speech, Ilves said that rock musicians suffered alongside many other people in Estonia under the Soviet rule and referred to Elvis Presley, John Lennon and the Sex Pistols, who were seen as offensive at their time in the West.

"That is the role played by rock 'n' roll," he said. "To offend sensibilities enough to cause people, societal attitudes and government behavior to change."

Ilves said that before the Enlightenment, people who were creative and different than others were denounced to the wide approval of the community, and were burned at the stake because group-thought outweighed the ideas of the lone individual.

"This is the ultimate tragedy of authoritarian societies," Ilves said on Mar. 28.

"When you kill creativity, you kill the spark of life and the culture, of science; you kill your scientists, you kill your artists. In doing so, you kill your society and also the chance to change.

"When collective belief systems, be they Marxism-Leninism, Fascism, or one or another religion that thinks it holds the unique key to truth, have more of a say than the lone individual, the result is tragedy and the end of any hope for democracy, for freedom or for real art of any kind," said Ilves.

Called "Culture Riot: Artists and Musicians Against Totalitarian Rule," the session with Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina was hosted by Moscow music journalist and promoter Artemy Troitsky who asked the questions, followed by a Q&A session with the audience as well as a shorter press conference for the media.

Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina entered to a packed conference room at the Nordic Forum Hotel in Tallinn, where the festival's discussions and panels were held, as human rights activists who fight for the rights of prisoners in Russia and as dissidents more than as musicians.

In response to a question from Troitsky, Tolokonnikova explained the band's stance and its choice of punk rock as a vehicle for protest.

"We wanted to return punk's original momentum which has since disappeared because people started to want to perform on stage and get a lot of money for it," Tolokonnikova said.

"It's no secret that our music is so-so, but it was not our goal to create good music. We use the principle of bad art, bad rhyme and bad music. The idea was as simple as a tank: Everyone has to have an access to music and we talk about it constantly; anyone can be Pussy Riot.

"Even if you can't write music, you can still make music similar to what we did. It's extremely simple, it's extremely accessible because, first and foremost, Pussy Riot is about political protest, while an illegal performance in an unexpected place gives a louder voice to this political protest," Tolokonnikova said.

Alyokhina added, "We find a stage in places for which we then pay with our freedom." The audience, comprised of local and international music industry people, reacted to their words with applause, as it did many times throughout the session.

The popular misconception is that Pussy Riot is a regular band and as such is obliged to play concerts, produce albums and go on tour.

Even Troitsky, a dissident journalist who has been a long-time supporter of Pussy Riot, expressed surprise at the ease with which the group's members rejected an offer of a lucrative world tour offered to them by a prominent international promoter in Tallinn on the eve of the session. All that the group had to do in order to appear at the largest music festivals across Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia was to transform themselves into a "real, practicing band."

"Pussy Riot started with illegal performances in unexpected places, and we're simply trying to explain that we can't remove the most important component from the idea behind the group," Tolokonnikova said.

"If we did, it would not be Pussy Riot anymore. But people are usually too fixated on a definite [assumption] and it's beyond their comprehension why we could not just go and perform on stage. As obvious as it is for them that it can be done, it is just as obvious for us that it should not be done. We refused, what else could we do? If we perform as Pussy Riot, we're going to do it as we did in Sochi recently. We recorded a song called 'Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland' in Sochi during the Olympics."

Speaking on the international perception of Russia, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina urged the audience not to confuse Russia and Putin.

"What we're doing, and what the Russian opposition is doing, is not anti-Russian, it is pro-Russian," Tolokonnikova said, while Alyokhina described their visit to an Estonian prison, Viru Vangla, one of the two prisons they visited to examine the prison conditions in Estonia.

"When we were leaving, several [Russian-speaking] prisoners were playing basketball in the yard," Alyokhina said.

"They shouted for me to come and say hello to them and then asked, 'Why are you against Russia?' I told them that I am not against Russia, that we are against Putin, which it is very important to understand. We would not like it very much if you and the citizens of other countries identify our country with this man, with Putin. Maybe we are not heard very well, I mean the opposition in Russia, but we do exist. We protest and speak as loudly as we can."

Ruslan Trochynskyi, a Estonia-based Ukrainian musician with the band Svjata Vatra, asked Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina about their reaction to events in Ukraine.

"We were shocked," Tolokonnikova said. "In such moments, when Russian troops invade another country, I wish we had something like Agora, the Greek townsquare, where we could gather and discuss what to do next. We tried to do something like this but, unfortunately, such attempts in Russia end with people being dragged into police vehicles."

A Tallinn gallery owner, Olga Temnikova, asked if the group had sacrificed their artistic freedom to be political.

"If you have legal means to participate in politics [in Estonia], politics no longer attracts people who seek artistic expression in other areas," Tolokonnikova said.

"In Russia, there is a lack of legal ways to protest. We are simply obliged to use art as an intelligent means to influence minds that have been invented by man."

At a later press conference, Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova were asked by a Latvian journalist whether foreign artists should boycott Russia over the annexation of Crimea.

"We are absolutely convinced that they could [go to Russia]," Tolokonnikova said.

"There are many options, of course. People are free not to go there but I think it would be much more interesting to go and deliver your political message to the people who came to listen to the music or watch a theater performance. This is not so difficult, you only have to include a political element in what you're doing. You'll connect with the audience and it's very likely that those who came to your concert and respect you will see the weight of your opinion. Of course, it would be great."

On the other hand, Alyokhina spoke about Manifesta, a roving biennial that is due to open in St. Petersburg in June. "Not so long ago, we signed a letter about Manifesta," Alyokhina said.

"We said that we believe it should not be held in St. Petersburg at this moment and we urged [the organizers] to hold it in Ukraine. We believe that what happens in Ukraine can be an inspiration for Russia. It's very important to support the Ukrainian opposition and do everything we can so that it works out for them. If Russians see that the propaganda is all lies, and they will see it for sure if everything works out in Ukraine, changes will become inevitable in our own country."

Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina cited Soviet dissidents such as Vladimir Bukovsky, Anatoly Marchenko, Larisa Bogoraz and Natalya Gorbanevskaya when asked about their role models.

When asked about Jesus Christ, they said they saw him as a role model, too, adding that he would face criminal misconduct charges in Russia, similar to that they received for their "punk

prayer" in 2012, for the Cleansing of the Temple.

Referring to the attacks and beatings that Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina survived in Sochi on Feb. 19 and in Nizhny Novgorod on Mar. 6, a reporter from the Delfi.ee news website asked them if they were afraid that they could be killed "like dogs" in Russia.

"I have such thoughts, but I want to continue my activities in Russia," Tolokonnikova said. "Of course, I realize that it could end quite badly for me, physically, but what can I do?"

Alyokhina added that they would not emigrate. "People who ask us about this should try to put themselves in our position," she said. "Imagine if something like what's happening in Russia now would start happening in your country. What our authorities are doing is close to fascism. Would you leave, wouldn't you do anything you could to tell the world that your country is different? That there *****is***** freedom there, and it exists within people who are different from the authorities. I am convinced that very many would act like we do."

Speaking of Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a Swedish-born, U.S.-educated former journalist with Radio Free Europe in Munich, they said they would like to see him as the President of Russia.

"First of all, his speech was a perfect example of humanitarianism which ended with the word 'freedom,' and it's certainly important for us to know that somewhere near us, near Russia, there is a country where the president will say such words and where he will come to events that happen under the badge of freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression," Tolokonnikova said.

"That's what we spoke with him about," said Tolokonnikova. "I admire him for how courageous he was when he made a statement in support of us at the very beginning of our imprisonment, when it had not yet become a commonplace, before Madonna or anyone else. And he made this risky move knowing that here, in Estonia, there is a decidedly conservative enclave that rushed to attack him for supporting us. Despite this, despite the threat of losing some political standing, he made this move, and this is tremendous."

The announcement on Mar. 21 that Pussy Riot would be one of the festival highlights elicited a hostile reaction from some in the ethnic Russian community of Tallinn, which accounts for 38.5 percent of the population compared to Estonian's 52.5 percent according to the most recent census from 2012.

More than a third of ethnic Russians in Estonia hold Russian citizenship and more than half do not speak Estonian. The main source of information for the Russian community is believed to be the Russian state television channels.

Predictably, in Russia's 2012 presidential election, 85.91 percent of voters with Russian citizenship in Estonia voted for Putin.

Alyona Surzhikova, an Estonian documentary film director of Russian origin, gave an emotional interview to an Estonian Russian-language news web portal on Mar. 27 to speak against Pussy Riot, calling the group "political provocateurs that mock and disrespect the Christian faith." She described the group's inclusion as a "spit into the face" to both the Russian and Estonian peoples.

"I am mother and I am ashamed that guests like Pussy Riot are received at the top level in my country," Surzhikova said. "I am ashamed that a president who speaks English dares to pronounce the name of such a group aloud."

The controversy did not stop there, with Tallinn-based Russian musician Ruslan PX who was the curator of the Manka Boutique Pop Festival showcase at Tallinn Music Week speaking out against the appearance of Pussy Riot on Estonia's ERR television on Mar. 27.

Ruslan PX, who admitted that he almost withdrew from the event after hearing the news, said that Russian and Estonian communities see Pussy Riot differently because they watch different media.

"For the Estonian-speaking organizers of Tallinn Music Week, Pussy Riot are prisoners of consciousness, people who suffered for their anti-Putin views, [while] they're effectively criminal,

blasphemous elements for very many of the Russians living in Estonia," he said.

On top of the controversy, RT (formerly known as Russia Today), the Kremlin-funded English-language television channel positioned for Western audiences, suddenly showed interest in the event by calling the organizers to be accredited to the meeting.

Tallinn Music Week director Helen Sildna answered the critics in her speech at the opening of the festival on Mar. 28.

"Over the recent days I have had to answer the question of whether Tallinn Music Week is a political event now," Sildna said.

"My answer has always been the same: We are strong believers in freedom. Tolerance, freedom of speech and self-expression are the foundation of creativity. May I say that it has nothing to do with politics here, but everything to do with basic human values, with human rights. If the creative people don't stand up for it in the society then who will?"

Unusually, a two-man police patrol was stationed outside the hotel during the Pussy Riot session, but no incidents were reported. The RT television crew failed to appear, while the controversy died out as the festival continued.

From Tallinn, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina traveled to Kiev to support Ukraine and then continued on to Brussels, where they spoke to the European Parliament on Apr. 1. From there they flew to New York, where they appeared on the Today Show on Apr. 2, met with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Apr. 3 and spoke at the fifth annual Women in the World Summit on Apr. 4.

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