

Words by Amy Liptrot

When the President of Estonia opens Tallinn Music Week with a speech quoting Jello Biafra and PJ Harvey, you know you are in a cool country. He also shows a video of punk band Pussy Riot playing a guerrilla gig in a Russian Orthodox Church, one of the acts leading to members being held in custody in neighbouring Russia. Not only is the President offering support to the activists, he is also providing a contrast to Estonia which is rightly proud of its liberty and where musicians would not be arrested for speaking out against the government.

This is a city relishing its creative freedom, which during the course of the fourth Tallinn Music Week is showcased by hundreds of diverse musical acts, both from Estonia and other (mainly north European) countries. Estonia is a small country and capital Tallinn only has a population of 416,000, yet it was European Capital of Culture in 2011: there is a lot going on.

Opening the festival in big, jubilant style are Finns Rubik (pictured above), freaking out with brass instruments and knitwear. Next up, Tallinn's own pixie star, twenty-year-old Iiris, represents a generation of young Europeans who have grown up with Björk, and is confident enough to mix pop ambition with mystic oddness, in front of enthusiastic local fans.

The shows are in venues around the city, hidden in courtyards and theatres in the cobbled Old Town, or in buildings symbolising the new Tallinn such as the Skype headquarters. An experimental electronic violinist, Tiit Kikas, plays in a mall bookshop, while the Estonian Male Voice Choir perform a new composition in a guild hall belonging to the Tallinn Brotherhood of Blackheads.

Some UK acts are taken to a new level in the surroundings of a grand Soviet cinema - the smart Britpop of Tall Stories and Napoleon III's irresistible celebratory layerings both finding new, receptive ears.

Although it is one of the Baltic States, Tallinn is just a short ferry journey from Helsinki and Nordic influences are apparent in the unreformed doom rock of Talbot – complete with

impressive metal roars – and Hanoi Rocks-influenced Rockcrime. Meanwhile, the hip detachment of Zebra Island and Several Symptoms, both of whom would be at home in a Shoreditch bar, seem under-developed compared to acts more confident in their Estonian identity - the best example of which is the astounding, perplexing Kreatiivmootor, whose constantly-moving frontman is like a glamorous toddler singing in an invented language, a rock 'n' roll tongues.

There is also an impressive classical programme – Estonia is the home of renowned contemporary composer Arvo Pärt associated with the style of "holy minimalism" influenced by sacred music – and music by Ardo Ran Varres is performed using a circular saw and bike wheel alongside an accordion, taken way beyond the tropes of folk.

On the 22nd floor of an austere Soviet hotel, Clash visits a "KGB room" where a hidden network of microphones was used to listen in on foreign tourists. Although those days are long gone, it is thrilling to imagine what the KGB would make of listening in on the chaotic, lively and free sounds of Tallinn today.

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