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## The Monday Profile: Andre Temkin

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SUMMARY: Artsy, urban, Russian musician takes root in Portland He didn't let go of dream for rock band

An 11-piece brass band blares Balkan rhythms, leading a parade of masked people, jesters and fire dancers. A drum's steady beat and melancholy trumpet notes fill Southeast Third Avenue. The parade snakes under the Burnside Bridge. There, clowns marry two human-size dummies: an American groom and Svetlana, a Russian mail-order bride.

At the head, bearing a torch, St. Petersburg native Andre Temkin grins like a content visionary as the procession clatters with gypsy tones toward a southeast Portland club. This rock-show-cum-carnival --dubbed International April Fool's Day --has been organized by Temkin, a man who has spent 12 years in Portland fusing Eastern European rock 'n' roll culture with the City of Roses' verve for avant-garde entertainment.

Temkin aims to re-create the close-knit, ceremonial feeling of Slavic family traditions and Russia's famous festivals through music, food, dance and a bit of good old-fashioned nostalgia. Some of his methods go beyond the mainstream, but his goals remain educating Americans about Russia's urban culture, and having a good time.

He represents a slice of Oregon's diverse Slavic community, whose members range from Ukrainian evangelical Christians to Russian Jews to agnostics, from villagers to city folk.

"He's a model of bicultural fusion," says Anya Valsamakis, who is active in the Slavic community. "There's quite a bit of (Russian) people here that are towards his end. He's the visible one, he's like a lightning rod."

Back in the U.S.S.R.

Born in St. Petersburg --Russia's second-largest city --when it was still called Leningrad, Temkin gravitated toward underground rock music as a means of free expression.

It was the 1980s, and the communist Soviet government considered rock subversive. It was heavily censored. Recordings were hard to get, so Temkin traded reel-to-reel tapes in subway stations.

"I was getting inspired by the music. It was a way to try to live in a different way," he says, "try to get some freedom by doing that."

But KGB agents photographed dissident musicians. And the government didn't allow bands to play, so they held private shows in apartments --including Temkin's flat. Hosts and attendees risked arrest.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, Temkin helped start a commercial radio station, rising to program director and working as a DJ.

But despite positive changes, the transition from communism was disheartening, Temkin says. Organized crime was everywhere; a friend was beat up by special police forces. And store shelves glared emptiness. In 1995, he immigrated to Oregon "to seek a sense of freedom."

The Portland beginnings were tough. Temkin, now a U.S. citizen, didn't know English then. He washed dishes in a Nordstrom cafeteria. Occasionally, he set up music events.

"I'd be going everywhere, asking for any job," he recalls, "and dreaming of future recording studio while doing the dishes."

As his language improved, so did the jobs. He even eventually was hired to do sound design for popular video games.

But he never let go of his goal of playing rock 'n' roll. He built a home recording studio and formed a band with Russian and American musicians called MiruMir --meaning "peace to the world," a message that was peppered on signs throughout Leningrad during the Cold War. The group performs its music, a mixture of American punk and Russia's rough melancholy, in Russian and English.

Temkin and friends also recently started an acoustic band, Chervona ("red" in Ukrainian), which plays covers of traditional Russian and gypsy songs.

Slowly, MiruMir landed gigs at Portland clubs as its popularity grew. "MiruMir are a fantastic rock 'n' roll band," says Frank Faillace, owner of Dante's, a downtown Portland nightclub where MiruMir plays. "They definitely have Portland's great Russian community firmly in their pockets."

#### Diversity and divisions

Tall, thin and incredibly energetic, Temkin effortlessly switches between Russian and slightly accented English. His relaxed manner easily blends in with Portlanders.

"Andre is the modern element. He's very urban, consciously urban," Valsamakis says. "It's about his style, his interests, his world view. He's the artsy diaspora."

Temkin says Portland is the perfect place for him because so many Russians continue to move here.

"There's a growing community of just regular folks, professional people who are still very Russian, but who are not religious or conservative," Temkin says. "And there is not much other Russian happening in Portland besides churches."

He hopes to fill that void. He brought to Portland rock stars Auktyon and Aquarium. He organized the "Red Revolution Party" and "Old Russian New Year's" at the Northwest Portland bar Slabtown, as well as another New Year's party at Ararat, a Portland Russian disco. He helped put together Gypsy Mania, a periodic music event around town. And MiruMir and Chervona play Slavic rock festivals all over the Northwest.

"There isn't a lot of people doing this sort of thing here," says Sasha Miljevic, a Portland musician and painter from the former Yugoslavia. "We don't want to just be seen as ex-communist countries, but as countries who are productive, who have a great music scene."

Not all area Russians embrace Temkin's efforts.

"There's a fundamentalist divide, in the sense that a very big section of the immigrants are devout --so he's outside those boundaries of comfort," Valsamakis says.

"He fits in in a weird kind of way, sticking out," says Alma Laskoniene, originally from Lithuania and Temkin's right hand in organizing shows.

Some in the Russian Christian community have criticized his work, Temkin says. "Somebody asked a friend to go to our concert and heard from that person that MiruMir is devil's music," he said.

#### Celebrate like Russians do

Still, MiruMir's fan base is growing, especially as the group's English improves. Temkin says he is now able to play with the language and make jokes in English, too. He sees his shows as an opportunity to educate. His slogan goes something like this: "Come to our party, celebrate like Russians do."

At the Old Russian New Year's party, he whipped out a PowerPoint presentation that included tips on how to raise proper toasts, drink vodka the right way and avoid a hangover. At Eugene's Slavic Festival last year, he followed another old Russian ritual: at the end of the night, visit the gypsies and hear them sing. So Temkin and friends holed up in a bar with a gypsy band from New York City and kept singing and drinking until the place shuttered.

The April Fools' show, modeled after a three-night Russian carnival, was just as intense. Seven live bands and dozens of bizarre solo performers occupied three stages at Rotture, the Southeast Portland club. Tickling mermaids and a fortune teller mingled with the tightly packed crowd. DJs spun international dance music. When MiruMir and Chervona took the stage, Russian fans swayed and belted out songs in unison.

"I traveled all the universe and nowhere could I find my dear," Temkin crooned in Russian, his voice full of nostalgia and rugged, Old World sound. "But I came back to Russia and my heart is hearing privet! Hello!"

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