Russian Hip Hop Terrorizes OfficeOps

The Next Phase of Russian Hip Hop Starts in East Williamsburg

By Alex Padalka

It’s 9:45, I’m changing from my clean-cut Chelsea outfit into army pants and hoody, while frantically trying to reach Archie, a.k.a. El Psycho-Bee of Rastatransemission. Archie and his fellow MC Kot Begemot (that’s the name of the cat character in Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita) promised me that they wouldn’t go on stage before 10 p.m. I finally get through: “Hey... We’re kinda going on right now...” Archie sounds really depressed. “It’s all going to shit, man.” I ask him to elaborate as I speed out of Manhattan. “Well, there’s just fights, man, everywhere kkkkgh...” — I lose the connection.

As I walk up to OfficeOps, host to the Oct. 4 Russian Hip-Hop Night, the first time when the MC forces Of Brighton Beach come together with the stars of North Bronx, a friend of the band is getting into his car: “Yeah, I’m not going back in there, man.” Rastatransemission just got off stage, their set cut short.

How bad can it get when a couple of Russian kids get together for a little hip hop?

The state of Russian hip hop is far behind that of most other countries. The acts that get churned out by Russian MTV and mainstream press are bland boy bands giving a nod to America’s successful rappers. They make most serious Russian musicians blush.

Rastatransemission is a Riverdale, NY-based hip-hop duo. Both members got their start in various hard-punk outfits. Their lyrics are highly critical of the political and social aspects of life both in the United States and in their homeland, as well as of mainstream, or “bling-bling” rap all over the world. Their approach to using the complex Russian language for hip hop gives one hope that there is future for the genre - it’s fresh, loose and wity, and, most importantly, lyrical in the best of traditions. They rap over beats they get from Russian musicians from their worldwide online network of friends, enemies, supporters and enthusiasts.

718 Lab, the other headliners, are a troupe of MCs and DJs out of Brighton Beach. Their songs are about life in predominantly Russian neighborhood, and they tend to get political as well. They have a big following among Brooklyn’s Russians. For both bands, this was their first major show.

Inside OfficeOps’ second-floor performance space, where all kinds of people regularly organize concerts, plays and parties without so much as a cigarette smoked in the nonsmoking space, Rastatransemission's security detail has a bleeding broken nose - a boot to the face while he was on the ground trying to break up the first of many fights. The fight happened halfway through Rastatransemission’s first song. Almost every one of their songs had to be cut short and restarted because of some brawl on the floor.

There’s a tense vibe to the place, kids walking purposefully across the dance floor not watching where they’re going. There are a few scuffles, a few shoes, everything gets broken up pretty fast since the crowd, at one point reaching about a hundred, is now very sparse. Out of that, about half of the people are sitting with their head between their knees. It appears that everyone there is seriously drunk apart from some members of the bands (Lab 718’s main MC is passed out next to the stage), the remaining security (one guard was kicked out for knee-dropping a rowdy fan) and the staff of OfficeOps (who seem ready for anything).

As a bottle of beer shatters behind me, the show is officially closed down. Eamonn, OfficeOps’ event planner, gets on stage between five or six drunk Russian wannabe MCs, takes over the mic and tells everyone to go home. The breakdancers stop as the music is shut off, but this will be a lengthy process.

“It was different from other events... The crowd was younger...,” says Eamonn. Perhaps what he’s trying to say is summarized by one of the fans arguing with another OfficeOps staff member over ending the party: “What did you expect? What do you think Russians do when they get drunk and party?”

Kot Begemot is standing shyly in the middle of The dance floor, hiding his smile because the situation is serious and he will be personally responsible for damages to the space. He acknowledges that the show was a disaster: “Stage fight was the least of my worries...” But it seems that despite the riot-like show, despite their set being cut short, and despite the fact that another show will not happen in the near future (Lab 718 broke up and one of the members is getting death threats from a fan who got kicked out), Kot Begemot knows something we don’t. As yet another fan comes over to shake his hand and give him props, it becomes evident: the seed has been planted. Russian hip hip take two.