

“Russia’s Greatest Love Machine”: Disco, Exoticism, Subversion

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ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Wright: “Russia’s Greatest Love Machine”: Disco, Exoticism, Subversion
(Under the direction of Jocelyn R. Neal)

In 1978, the European disco group Boney M made history when they performed a series of ten concerts in Moscow as the guests of the Soviet government, the first Western popular music group to receive such an invitation. Yet despite breaking through the Iron Curtain, Boney M could not avoid the censorship of the Communist government. One of their biggest hits in Russia at that time, “Rasputin,”—a humorous portrait of the infamous monk who was an aide to the Tsar in the early twentieth century—circulated throughout Russia in bootleg copies. Because Boney M utilized musical signifiers of “Russianness” along with tongue-in-cheek lyrics about a Russian historical figure, the Soviet government deemed the song unacceptable for performance or release. Close musical analysis coupled with a critical examination of the Russian reception of “Rasputin” reveals a confluence of musical signification, exoticism, and the relationship of music and politics.

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Section I: Introduction

In 1978, the European disco group Boney M made history when they performed a series of ten concerts in Moscow as the guests of the Soviet government, the first Western popular music group to receive such an invitation.¹ Yet despite breaking through the Iron Curtain, Boney M could not avoid the censorship of the Communist government.² One of their biggest hits in Russia at the time, “Rasputin,”—a humorous portrait of the infamous monk who was an aide to Tsar Nicholas II in the early twentieth century—circulated throughout Russia in bootleg copies.³ Presumably because Boney M utilized musical signifiers of “Russianness” along with tongue-in-cheek lyrics about a Russian historical figure, the Soviet government deemed the song unacceptable for performance or release.

The censorship did not prevent audiences from crying out for the song at each concert. Every night, Boney M repeated their explanation that there was simply not enough time to play all of their hits, and the band’s superficial explanation only fueled more interest in the song, both as a musical product and as a means for underground rebellion.⁴ “Rasputin” was embraced by Soviet youth, but banishment by governmental

¹ John Shearlaw and David Brown, *Boney M* (Great Britain: Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1979), 106. This information also appears in nearly every periodical article about Boney M at this time.

² “Boney M: Red Hot in Russia,” *Melody Maker*, 16 December 1978, 3. Numerous media sources point out this fact in their reporting on the subject.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

authorities imbued the song with a subversive quality that disco in the Soviet Union had not yet known. The performances of Boney M in Moscow bring together musical signification, exoticism, and the relationship of music and politics, which illuminates popular music's ability to comment on larger cultural situations.

In the late 1970s, Russia was considered an even more exotic locale by American and Western European audiences than it is today. Consequently, issues of musical exoticism are at the heart of this investigation. The musical signifiers utilized by Boney M to represent Russia and Russianness in "Rasputin" emerge from a close musical analysis of the piece. During the Cold War, American and European popular media associated countries in Western Europe and the United States with the idea of the "West," whereas communist countries of the Soviet bloc were deemed the "East." The communist associations between China and the USSR strengthened the connection between the countries in the minds of the American public, though during the Cold War the Soviet Union remained the primary enemy.⁵ This separatist mindset within the American and European popular imagination provided a musical space where Russia could be exoticized.

Musicologist Ralph Locke defines exoticism as "the evocation of a place, people or social milieu that is (or is perceived to be) profoundly different from accepted local norms in its attitudes, customs and morals."⁶ He further identifies various musical signifiers of "otherness," foremost among these being modal melodies and harmonies, bare textures, and the use of unfamiliar musical instruments. The applicability of this

⁵ Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia* (London: Penguin Press, 2003), 311-313.

⁶ Ralph Locke, "Exoticism," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 11 February 2007) <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>.

theoretical and social framework to analysis is illustrated in Locke's exploration of French opera through the lens of exoticism. In his investigation of Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, Locke contextualizes the orientalist views present in France in the nineteenth century.⁷ A subcategory of musical exoticism, orientalism represented "Eastern" countries in such works. Locke demonstrates that modal musical spaces, unusual orchestration, and thin textures located within an overall Western framework were ways in which Saint-Saëns represented the "East" in *Samson et Dalila*.⁸

Locke further posits that exoticism and orientalism are not necessarily about geography alone, but also about claims of social value. It is easy to restrict exoticist ideas such as "East" and "West" to countries and nations of differing geographic location, but while geographic distance is certainly a key component, it is not the only element at work. In describing the plot of *Samson et Dalila*, Locke asserts that the mixture of various subplots in the opera "reinforce...the opera's underlying binary opposition between a morally superior 'us' (or 'collective Self') and an appealing but dangerous 'them' ('collective Other') who come close to causing 'our' downfall."⁹ With this statement, Locke adds the important dimension of judgment to musical exoticism: the "West" is superior and moral, whereas the "East" is inferior and depraved.

Musicologist Jonathan Bellman provides a complementary view of exoticism. He brings the parallels between folk music's value system and exoticism to the fore by

⁷ Ralph Locke, "Constructing the 'Oriental' Other: Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991): 261-302.

⁸ Ralph Locke, "Orientalism," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 26 February 2007) <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>. Edward Said has also written extensively on the subject. *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

⁹ Locke, "Samson et Dalila," 263.

contextualizing exoticism as a phenomenon that employs strangeness more than distance and demands comparative judgment (a furthering of Locke's ideas):

“Exotic does not mean merely distant...The suggestion of strangeness is the overriding factor: not only does the music *sound* different from ‘our’ music, but it also suggests a specifically alien culture or ethos. To the fertile imagination, a different culture or distant place suggests far more than the sum of its external musical indicators—indicators such as new uses of percussion, an increased use of drones, or perhaps a modal scale. Such aural signifiers suggest the different mores, goals, circumstances, and practices of the exotic culture. In turn, the very acknowledgment of difference carries within it an implicit comparison and judgment; that is, the idea that ‘they are different from us’ cannot help becoming ‘they are happier, sadder, more serious, more pleasure-loving, purer, more corrupt.’”¹⁰

Bellman's perception of exoticism is particularly appropriate in the case of Boney M's exotic othering of Russia. More than a geographic “other,” the Soviet Union is also “othered” from a Western political perspective because of its communist society.

Though Bellman and Locke focus on Western art music in their investigations, exotic musical signification is employed equally frequently in popular and mass-consumed musics as in art music, as several authors have shown. The music of *The X-Files*, for example, is described by musicologist Robyn Stillwell as evoking exotic (“alien”) lands through the use of rare instruments and modal melodies.¹¹ Other contemporary examples of exoticism within popular music contexts range from the theme music to the television show “Survivor” (first aired in the 2000 in the United States) to the music of the Pussycat Dolls. “Survivor” employs repetitive, minimalist rhythmic motives underneath a choir chanting vocables while images from foreign locales are

¹⁰ Jonathan Bellman, “Introduction,” *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), xii.

¹¹ Robyn J. Stilwell, “The Sound is ‘out there’: Score, Sound Design and Exoticism in *The X-Files*,” *Analyzing Popular Music*, edited by Allan Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71.

shown on the screen to create its exotic aura.¹² Musicologist Kristen McGee points to the pervasive belly dancing within the Pussycat Dolls' video for "Buttons" as imbuing the song with an exotic and oriental flavor.¹³ In addition to musical signifiers of the exotic, popular music often involves visual elements that function to "other" a musical work. The analytical investigation of "Rasputin" presented here reveals that the same musical signifiers of the "other" that these previous studies revealed are also prevalent in this song.

Along with providing an additional case study in musical signification of the exotic, this analysis also contributes to the historical investigation of Soviet reception of Western popular music, a topic that has received only marginal attention by scholars. The extant literature includes historian S. Frederick Starr's examination of jazz music in the Soviet Union, which addresses the political issues emerging from reception in this context.¹⁴ Other authors in this sparse group include Russian journalist Artemy Troitsky¹⁵ and historian Timothy Ryback¹⁶ who have investigated the history of Western rock music in Russia and political issues that have arisen within that scene. Though disco music itself receives only brief mention in these texts, they provide a critical summary of

¹² Kimberly Francis, "'Ancient Voices': Construction of the Primitive in the Music of 'Survivor'" (paper, University of Virginia, 9 September 2006).

¹³ Kristen Mc Gee, "Simulating Orientalism and Gender in Transglobal Culture: From Little Egypt to MTV" (paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 15 February 2007).

¹⁴ S. Frederick Starr, *Red & Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994).

¹⁵ Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988).

¹⁶ Timothy Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

the musical background from which disco emerged in the Soviet Union. It is within this context that the present study adds a new contribution.

The case study of Boney M is situated squarely in the context of the global marketing and reception of disco. Emerging in African-American, Latino, and gay dance clubs in New York City in the 1970s, disco music is characterized by its regular and articulated accents on every beat, and elaborate instrumentation involving orchestral instruments and synthesizers. The genre's simple lyrics often take a back seat to the complex arrangements and riveting grooves of the songs. This composite was designed to provoke and foster dancing, and its name is derived from the term discotheque, which identified a venue that played pre-recorded dance music in the 1960s.¹⁷ The discotheque evolved into "a place where the DJ choreographed music and lighting to manipulate the mood on the floor toward climax."¹⁸ Disco was designed to induce a musical ecstasy that would manifest itself through dance. In the years following its coalescence as a musical genre in 1973, disco traveled across the Atlantic to Europe as part of a broader exportation of popular culture, including such artists/producers as Barry White (*I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little Bit More Baby*) and the Love Unlimited Orchestra (*Love's Theme*).

The American style of disco was largely derived from rhythm and blues, whereas the European style (Eurodisco) that evolved from the American style "tended to feature simple, chanted vocals, less syncopated bass parts, thicker arrangements filled with orchestral instruments and synthesizers, and relied on a producer who directed

¹⁷ David Brackett, "Disco," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 11 February 2007) <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>.

¹⁸ T. Smucker, "Disco," *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, edited by A. De Curtis et al (New York, 1976), 562.

anonymous studio musicians.”¹⁹ The European disco style quickly came to dominate both markets, and by 1977, many characteristics of European disco began to appear in America while the obvious references to rhythm and blues styles gradually disappeared. Musicians like Donna Summer and Silver Connection, with a European sound, replaced music groups such as Kool and the Gang, who used funk idioms. Although Summer was American by birth, she had traveled to Germany to forward her musical theater career, and consequently her disco music was recorded in the Munich style.²⁰ Whereas the old style of American disco was dependent on the past (rhythm and blues), “the Europeans fixed disco from its drive to cannibalize the past by developing forms unique to the new genre.”²¹ Along with these musical changes, the images of artists associated with the style took on added importance, with groups such as ABBA or Silver Connection. Phrases such as “Disco-with-a-Pretty-Face” and “Dancing-Bimbos-in-the-Background” became popular descriptors.²² In other words, disco developed a prominent visual dimension in its fans’ conception. The look became as important—if not more so—than the music itself.

The story of Boney M comes out of this context of Eurodisco. Boney M was the creation of Frank Farian, a failed German singer-songwriter, who honed and perfected his studio skills throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Then through a fluke, he produced a hit for an as-of-yet unformed band. Although surprising within today’s music culture, this progression of events was not uncommon at the time. Shortly after learning that he had

¹⁹ Brackett, “Disco.”

²⁰ David Brackett, “Donna Summer,” *Grove Music Online* (accessed 1 March 2007) <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>.

²¹ Smucker, “Disco,” 565.

²² *Ibid.*

produced a hit, Farian set out to find a face for his song, and Boney M was born as a live group. The newly-formed band catapulted to stardom in Europe and Canada with hit after hit, and broke numerous album sales records as their songs reached the top of the industry charts multiple times. The zenith of their career, however, was the release of their album *Nightflight to Venus* in 1978, featuring such hits as “Rivers of Babylon” (originally recorded by the Melodians) and “Rasputin.”²³

“Rasputin” by Boney M provides a case study in musical signification of ‘the other,’ and its appropriation by fans within the exoticized culture. A detailed analysis of the song illuminates what musical markers the group and Farian utilized to evoke an image of Russianness. While it may come as no surprise that Russia was viewed by the West as an exotic land and was represented as such in the period of the Cold War, it is remarkable that Russian youths embraced the song. Furthermore, this song and its reception in Russia comments on the youth’s relationship to the Soviet government at the time. With an oppressive government banning the song, Soviet youths yearned for it even more—the denial of access only fostered the desire to listen. In an unlikely historical twist, the song became an avenue through which Soviet youths could subvert the government by embracing not only by an outlawed product, but one that purposefully poked fun at Russia’s history as well. This examination of the reception of “Rasputin” by Russian audiences provides an inlet into a deeper understanding of music and politics among youth fan bases in the context of global politics.

²³ The Melodians were a reggae group that originated in Jamaica in the 1960s.

Section II: Contextualizing Boney M

The social meanings of “Rasputin” arise from the contexts of Boney M’s creation, “Rasputin’s” production, and the song’s fan reception. Furthermore, perceptions of disco in the West and the Soviet Union, Boney M’s career within the context of disco at large, and the relationship between the West and the East during the late 1970s are essential contributors to any discussion regarding “Rasputin.” This large-scale contextualization of Boney M and “Rasputin” portrays an intricate web of social conditions that, during one short decade, empowered “Rasputin” as a subversive product in a fan scene located far—both by geography and by interpretation—from the location of the song’s creation.

The Emergence and Problematization of Western Disco

The genre of disco developed in the United States in the 1970s partly as a response to rock and roll, which failed to supply suitable sonic accompaniment for a newly emergent entertainment scene fueled by the cultural and political movements of the time. In many ways, disco ideologically opposed rock. Whereas rock music was album-oriented, regarding the LP as a completed work of art, disco utilized the LP as a tool for manipulation and as a basis for new musical construction in the hands of the emerging figure of the DJ. Disco lent authentic agency to recorded music while rock and roll privileged live performance as authentic and treated the recording as a reified art object, especially in light of the emerging “album-oriented rock” scene. Conceptual differences and changes in ideas of authenticity were not the only loci of difference

between the two genres, however. Disco also had a visual aspect: glamour in wardrobe and presentation that contrasted sharply with the torn t-shirt and ripped jeans look associated with roots rock and Southern rock (the subgenre of “glam rock” stood apart from this).²⁴ Not only did the emergent genre offer glitz, but it also gained the stamp of media approval that allowed it to migrate from the social fringes to the suburban mainstream. As journalists Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen summarize:

Disco was a glamour-packed reaction against the plodding and self-indulgent rock music of the excitement-parched early seventies. Created by people marginalized by their color (black), class (working), race (Hispanic), or sexuality (gay), it was adopted by suburban trendies once the media gave it their signed, sealed, and delivered approval.²⁵

This musical genre, which fueled those fringe cultural scenes in dance clubs, migrated into the suburban mainstream with the stamp of media approval and through its commercial adoption as the new music in Hollywood.

As nights of endless dancing became popular in African-American, Latino, and gay communities in larger cities, particularly New York City and San Francisco, the late 1960s club culture was primed for the entrance of disco. In 1969, the New York underground club Salvation opened as the “first totally uninhibited homosexual discotheque in America” and had “the most celebrated disc jockey of the early disco era,” Francis Grasso.²⁶ The following year, DJ David Mancuso opened The Loft—the first “invitation only” club (a crucial aspect of the American disco scene)—and further

²⁴ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 361.

²⁵ Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen, *Saturday Night Forever: The Story of Disco* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000), xii.

²⁶ Both quotations cited in Kai Fiktenscher, “There’s No Problem I Can’t Fix, ‘Cause I Can Do It In the Mix,” in *Music and Technoculture*, edited by Rene T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 296.

spearheaded the disco movement, a move that was somewhat ironic considering he never identified himself as gay, Latino, or Black (though his liberal political views motivated his sympathy for the civil rights struggle).

Disco continued to grow with the increasing number of clubs offering continuous streams of dance music. The genre also began to lay claim to positions in the Top 40 popular music charts. Shortly after its rise in these minority communities, disco became popular among the American mainstream. With the release of the film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), disco music and dancing became symbolic enactments of the broader American theme of upward mobility.²⁷ Variations on this theme reappeared on the silver screen several times in the subsequent five years, most notably in *Flashdance* (1983) and *Stayin' Alive* (1983). With John Travolta's performance and other similar packagings (like Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance*), disco migrated from clubs and venues located outside the mainstream urban, white entertainment scene into a status of social acceptability.

Disco's capitalization on the technological advances of the turntable and mixer that occurred in the 1970s (and continued through the mid 1980s) also contributed to its mainstream appeal.²⁸ Other technologies, such as the creation of 12-inch singles that allowed for longer musical sets on one sound disc, further supported the disco idiom. DJs began to create mix tapes, which were recordings of club sets with the musical tracks already mixed together to facilitate transport of equipment to club gigs.²⁹ As

²⁷ Starr, *American Popular Music*, 361.

²⁸ Kai Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 36.

²⁹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 59.

ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher summarizes, “Stereophonic and hi-fi sound, 7-inch singles and 12-inch LPs, high-output amplification, and sophisticated loudspeaker design all became part of the disco technoscape.”³⁰ Disco’s livelihood was deeply embedded in the developing music technologies.

The 1970s middle-American economic landscape provided a conducive environment for disco as well. The national economy was in the midst of a recession that spanned from approximately 1973 to 1975, characterized by a rise in inflation, a rise in unemployment, and an oil shock where prices gradually rose from \$2.60/gallon in 1973 to \$11/gallon in 1975.³¹ One consequence of the economic situation was that club owners were enticed to hire DJs instead of live bands to provide music.³² The cost of hiring DJs, who were often responsible for bringing their own records, was cheaper than funding an entire band, and in most instances, the audience was equally satisfied.

Although economic conditions and technological advances may well have spurred disco’s beginnings, the dedication of its fans kept the genre thriving. Few pop music genres have simultaneously inspired such strong devotion and repulsion as disco. The differing ideologies of rock and disco already discussed sparked disagreements between some avid fans of each genre. Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this conflict was the anti-disco rally held by DJ Steve Dahl in 1979 during a Chicago White Sox game. Dahl, a DJ for the rock station WLUP in Chicago and a pronounced “disco hater,” organized a promotion where people could enter the game for only 98 cents if they

³⁰ Fikentscher, “There’s No Problem I Can’t Fix,” 297.

³¹ Marc Labonte and Gail Makinen, *The Current Economic Recession: How Long, How Deep, and How Different From the Past*, CRS Report for Congress, 10 January 2002, 17.

³² Starr, *American Popular Music*, 362.

brought a disco record. The records were arranged in large crates in the outfield and blown up. Severe rioting by both sides after the explosion resulted in the cancellation of the baseball game.³³ Alongside such spectacles, many rock fans adopted the slogan “disco sucks” and maintained a strong aversion to the new genre. Yet rock fans’ staunch criticism ironically inspired the passion that disco followers were willing to express for their music; the one group’s pronounced aversion to disco strengthened the proponents’ devotion.

Journalists and critics have offered many theories as to why disco music elicited such disdain from large groups of rock fans, ranging from homophobia to racism.³⁴ The most logical reason, however, appears to be the basic ideological opposition to rock and, more importantly, the philosophical investment fans made in rock as something profound and artistically transcendent that absorbed the mind. Popular music scholar John Covach offers one explanation as to why disco was so objectionable to rock fans:

In many ways, disco stood in direct confrontation to the hippie aesthetic that had been developing in rock music since the mid 1960s. Disco music was not about listening to music but rather about dancing to it. It was not concerned with important spiritual or social issues; it was about fun. And perhaps most important to the musicians involved, disco was not about the specific artists but about the beat in general – and this beat was often provided by a machine. It took the production authority away from the artist and turned it back over to the producer. In fact, disco music threatened to take back everything that rock had won.³⁵

For many Americans, disco music represented a countermovement to rock that stood in firm opposition to many of the principles that rock followers had come to value. Disco

³³ *New York Times*, “Anti-Disco Rally Halts White Sox,” 13 July 1979, sec. A, p. 16.

³⁴ These speculations are cited in both John Covach, *What’s that Sound? An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2006), and the Starr/Waterman text, but are refuted by both authors.

³⁵ Covach, *What’s that Sound?*, 394.

instead rewarded its fans with a physical, mental, and artistic escape into grooves and body-movement that threatened the rock and roll mystique and sparked the ire of rock fans.

Although the above events are America-centric, similar debates and evolutions occurred in Europe. In 1973, disco music traveled to Europe and was embraced by a large community who quickly altered and personalized the genre. Eurodisco emerged a short time later and became representative of the definitive disco sound recognized today. Certain fans of rock and roll continued to lash out against what they viewed as a pseudo-music (this was even true of some rock fans in Russia!).³⁶ Disco's initial development may have been in America, but its stylistic maturation was European.

The Soviet Union Confronts Disco

The meanings assigned to and representations of disco in the Soviet Union differed greatly from those in the West. Within the USSR, particularly with regard to the government, disco represented a lesser of two musical evils (the other being rock) that were pressing inward from the borders and coming explicitly from American popular culture. Feeding these concerns was the position of America, viewed as the superpower of the West, and thus the most feared. As early as the 1920s, Russian youth culture had latched onto and embraced American jazz culture. When jazz entered the culture of most of Europe in the 1920s, Russia was within its first three years of Bolshevik rule and had yet to become the closed nation associated with Stalin's rule. Consequently, jazz easily filtered across the border into the Soviet Union. This new American music was not met

³⁶ Interview with Radislav Lapushin, Russian scholar and Professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 23 March 2007.

with universal acceptance, but instead of strict censorship, there existed a dialogue over jazz's validity and moral message.³⁷

Growing out of the presence of American jazz in the Soviet Union, rock and roll began to sweep the nation in the 1950s, spearheaded by the release of Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock."³⁸ From this moment on, the Soviet government and the local governments of its constituent republics engaged in an outward attack on rock music. Laws restricting volume levels, forced lyric alterations, and even mandates on hair length were all designed to thwart the growing rock epidemic.³⁹ Sensing the battle against rock was never going to be won, the government acquiesced slightly through the creation of sanctioned vocal instrumental ensembles (VIAs) in 1966. VIAs were rock groups created by the Ministry of Culture who were "willing to cut their hair, moderate their decibel levels, and purge their repertoires of offensive Western songs" in exchange for enjoying the "benefits of state sponsorship—national concert tours, appearance on radio and television, recording opportunities on the Melodiya label."⁴⁰ Although far from an ideal solution for either the government or the fans clamoring for uncensored music, it was the best possible compromise for the time. That was, until 1976.

In the 1970s, Western disco music began to gain popularity in the Soviet states. The interaction between disco and governmental authorities was drastically different than that seen with rock. In fact, the Soviet government openly embraced disco music. In their perception, as Ryback points out, "The 'disco sound,' with its steady rhythm and

³⁷ Starr, *American Popular Music*, 15-19.

³⁸ Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc*, 19-20.

³⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

innocuous lyrics, lulled rather than provoked audiences.”⁴¹ This embrace of the disco idiom reached its apex on October 23, 1976, when the Soviet city of Riga hosted the first Interrepublic Discotheque Festival and Competition. During the competition, each participating city presented a discotheque format for nightly operation, complete from musical selections, lighting patterns, and even proposed propagandistic material.⁴² Ryback asserts that the gathering was the “first national effort to assess the effectiveness of the discotheque as a means of ideological indoctrination” and that by the end of the conference, “the participants concluded that *diskoteki* could provide an effective means of entertaining young people while indoctrinating them with proper political and ideological guidance.”⁴³ Following this conference, *diskoteki* sprung up all around the Soviet Union; in 1978, Ukraine boasted more than 42, while Moscow registered over 187 *diskoteki* by the end of the decade.

The establishment of *diskoteki* is not the only evidence of governmental support of disco music, however. The recording industry in the Soviet Union followed a similar trend. The policy in the Soviet Union prior to 1978 had been that for every release of a Western music recording allowed by the government, a Soviet counterpart must also be produced to prevent the total infiltration of the West. In 1978, the *Melodiya* label (under governmental control), released *Arrival*, an ABBA album with no accompanying Soviet counterpart, and no apparent official sanction. This further marked a distinct change in governmental attitude toward Western popular music.

⁴¹ Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc*, 159.

⁴² Participating cities included Riga, Ventspils, Kaunas, Tartu, and Tashkent.

⁴³ Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc*, 160.

The Producer as Disco Artist

Contextualizing disco in its lineage of musical genres, both in the United States and the USSR, only reveals part of the background story to “Rasputin.” Aside from the Soviet government’s embrace of disco, which provided Boney M their initial inlet into the USSR, there is also a personal story that co-exists with these large genre-movement trends and transmissions. That personal story involves the struggle of a fledgling singer-songwriter who yearned for global musical success; an achievement that was only realized when he abandoned his performance career and instead focused on developing his skills as a producer.

Disco music gave less creative agency to the music group and instead placed this mantle on the producer, who was responsible for creating grooves and orchestrating songs. For this reason, it was not uncommon for producers to mix and release tracks under a pseudonym before there was a group in place to perform the songs. Producers tended to be skilled in studio technology used to create musical tracks. A phenomenon emerged where the producer was a complete substitute for a band; one person could place musical layers on top of each other and create a song without additional musicians. While this practice of a single musician performing more than one instrumental role had existed in the studio in various formats since the invention of multitrack recording, it was an extreme shift in ideological approach for a single person to substitute entirely for the ensemble. For example, the production duo of Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellote, two of the most popular producers in Munich, produced many of Donna Summer’s hits—creating all the grooves and instrumental tracks over which Summer would lend her vocal

talents.⁴⁴ It was often the case that producers would wait for the song to prove its appeal through record sales and radio before investing time and money into forming a touring group. In the story of Boney M, the musical origination therefore begins with the story of their producer, Frank Farian, who was creating their signature repertory and grooves before the band ever came into being.

Frank Farian was a German producer who struggled throughout most of his life to achieve a successful music career. With an affinity for black American music, Farian found significant influence in artists such as Otis Redding and The Coasters. According to his autobiographical accounts, Farian purposefully strove to create music that fused black music and European music together in order to reach international commercial success.⁴⁵ Frequent disappointments throughout his musical career motivated Farian to strive harder to obtain the musical success that he had always aspired to, and it was this determination and set of influences that led to the creation of Boney M. A brief survey of his biography helps explain the directions in which he pushed his group after their formation as well as the circumstances that led to “Rasputin’s” insertion into the USSR.

Born Franz Reuther on 19 July 1941 in Rhineland-Palatine, Germany, Farian was the youngest of three children.⁴⁶ He never knew his father, who was killed in Russia during World War II (when the boy was only a year old), and Farian and his older brother and sister were raised solely by their mother. Although recognized for his musical talent at a young age, Reuther’s first career direction was cooking. Despite this detour, he

⁴⁴ David Brackett, “Donna Summer.”

⁴⁵ Goldman, “Babylon by Limousine,” 39.

⁴⁶ [Author not credited on web site] “Story,” <http://www.frankfarian.com> (accessed 5 February 2007).

never gave up his aspirations to be a musician. In fact, during his stint as a chef, he changed his name to Frank Farian believing that Franz Reuther was not the name of a star. As did many German teens in the decades following World War II, Farian developed a deep interest in rock and roll as well as other musics of black Americans.

Farian's career as a chef proved quite lucrative, even though his passion lay elsewhere. Each month, Farian put money into a savings account and in 1961, after saving 10,000 Marks, he quit his job and bought enough instruments to comprise an entire band. Shortly thereafter, he founded a musical group: Frankie Farian und die Schatten (Frankie Farian and the Shadows). Harkening to American rock and roll as their main influence, the band began by playing live gigs, and then recorded their first rock single in 1963, "Shooting Ghost," produced and released by Farian himself. They achieved only moderate success on the European pop charts, but undeterred, Farian followed up the next year with the release of *Yakety Yak* – a total flop in spite of its attempts to capitalize through the title song, a cover version of the Coasters' smash hit and a reflection of Farian's move toward doo-wop and the R&B sounds.⁴⁷

Drifting further from the sonic developments of rock and roll, Farian continued to attempt a career built on cover versions of American R&B and doo-wop songs. In 1965, the band released two more singles—a new version of The Drifter's "Under the Boardwalk" and Otis Redding's "Mr. Pitiful."⁴⁸ Neither album had any commercial success to speak of, and Farian again became frustrated. In 1967, a friend of his by the name of Monti Lüftner arranged a record deal for Farian with Ariola records. This

⁴⁷ Daniel Diezi and Shaun O'Shea, "The Golden Years: The Story of Boney M.," http://www.diezi.com/bonem/golden_years/goldenyears.html (accessed 5 February 2007).

⁴⁸ "Story," <http://www.frankfarian.com>

proved to be the tipping point for the band, which ultimately broke up in 1968. Their demise launched the next chapter of Farian's musical career, one he undertook as a solo artist.⁴⁹

Farian's solo career showed promise at first. In 1969, he performed on the ZDF Hitparade, a German television show for emerging musicians. It was not long, however, before his solo career began to resemble that of *die Schatten*. In 1975, dejected by his apparent lack of musical prospects, Farian locked himself in a recording studio and produced a short pop song entitled "Baby, Do You Wanna Bump?" The song consisted of a deep male voice and female choir (hired studio musicians) plus multi-layered instrumental tracks. The song developed out of Farian's continued love for black music (soul in this case), and the "straightforward piece of dance action us[ed] all the new tricks of the trade – the synthesized strings, thumping bass and strict drum beat with minimal lyrics."⁵⁰ This effort again proved that the technological advances embraced by disco allowed one person to be the whole band, and tracks could be "perfected" (as least in the ears of the producer) through endless refinement, repetition, and manipulation. Hansa studios, which had signed Farian in 1971, released the song under the pseudonym Boney M. The name was derived from an Australian detective show that had become popular in Germany, featuring a protagonist in blackface by the name of Boney.⁵¹ Few copies of "Baby, Do You Wanna Bump?" were sold in Germany, the target audience for the release. To the surprise of Hansa and Farian, however, the song began climbing the

⁴⁹ Diezi, "The Golden Years."

⁵⁰ Shearlaw, *Boney M*, 35.

⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

charts in Belgium and Holland within a few weeks.⁵² Hansa had released the song all over Europe, but the success in Belgium and Holland was both unpredicted and without apparent logic. There was an outcry for a live, public performance of the song as a result of its success, so in keeping with the disco trend, Farian and Hansa knew that they had a short window of opportunity to recruit and craft a stage-ready representation of Boney M, thereby building an actual band with name recognition and a ready-made following.

Farian viewed “Baby, Do You Wanna Bump?” as being different from normative European pop music and scoured Germany to find the “exotic” faces of Boney M to match the character of his music.⁵³ When Farian was finished, Boney M consisted of four West-Indian singer-dancers (Liz Mitchell, Maizie Williams, Marcia Bennett, and Bobby Farrell), whom he found in various situations in Germany (from musical theater actress to club DJ). Farian initially hired this group for their dancing ability, but soon realized that their voices blended quite well and began to use them in recording sessions as well. The group often lip-synced in concert in order to emphasize the physical aspect of dance during the performance, a common aspect of Eurodisco at large.

With his music group now assembled and a musical formula with proven sales power, Farian’s Boney M continued to have hit after hit, topping the charts and breaking records for total album sales in the UK and continental Europe. Their success continued through the 1970s into the beginning of the 1980s. They reached the commercial height of their career in 1978 with the release of the album *Nightflight to Venus*. It is on this album that hits such as “Rivers of Babylon,” a reggae/European fusion of the West-Indian hymn of the same name, and, most relevant to this study, “Rasputin” appear.

⁵² Shearlaw, *Boney M*, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

Politics, the East, the West

These events and developments in Farian's career occurred in the larger context of the Cold War; the ideological and geographical struggle between the United States and her allies and the Soviet Union beginning after World War II, with tensions starting to relax in 1989.⁵⁴ The following discussion illuminates the Cold War's political landscape that shaped the policies, practices, and expectations that affected the arts, and most specifically, popular music in its exchange between the two populations.

The opposition between the primary goals of two nation-states framed the Cold War. On one front, the Soviet Union set out to lead the international communist movement and secure its own national interests.⁵⁵ On the other front, the United States sought to spread democratic principles to the East. These two positions were perceived as being in direct conflict and created a tense relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. That tense relationship fueled both fiction and speculation in Western culture through an undercurrent of novels, news releases, and Hollywood interpretations in such a way that quite a bit of Western artistic output was informed by or infused with the struggles of the Cold War.⁵⁶

The Cold War context made the USSR government innately suspicious of Western art in all forms, including music. To loyal Soviets, Western art represented the flourishing of capitalist culture in a setting of individualism, the ideological negation of the Communist strategy that the Soviet government had built its power on. To American

⁵⁴ Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004), G-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1038.

⁵⁶ See Arne Axelsson, *Restrained Response: American Novels of the Cold War and Korea, 1945-1962* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990) and Jeremy Issacs and Taylor Downing, *Cold War: An Illustrated History, 1945-1991* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1998), 122-123.

patriots, Soviet censorship represented the repression of human rights and individual rewards, the very creed that outlined the American Dream. The Cold War motivated the codification of the east/west separation in culture, and allowed one to become exoticized in the mind of the other. The Russians were viewed as an evil superpower in the minds of many in the West. To Russian youth who were against strict Soviet policies, Western cultural products represented freedom and offered a glance of a better life.⁵⁷ The atmosphere of the Cold War furthermore defined the Stalinist standard of censorship of art and criticism, and provided an environment in which subversive underground movements could thrive.

After World War II, the USSR emerged as the most beaten-down country involved in the war, with 10-20% of its population being lost.⁵⁸ This situation, coupled with previous invasions of Soviet lands, prodded Joseph Stalin to expand the borders of the USSR. “Extending the borders of the Soviet Union and dominating the formerly independent successor states of Eastern Europe would provide needed security and compensate for the fearful losses the Soviet people had endured in the war.”⁵⁹ The political tension caused by the Soviet Union’s ideologies led Churchill to declare that a metaphorical “Iron Curtain” had been erected in Europe, dividing the free, democratic West from a communist East under totalitarian rule. In 1947, the American government orchestrated a strict containment policy to thwart the expansion of the Soviets. This

⁵⁷ In a personal interview about the subject, Russian scholar Radislav Lapushin was adamant about how an American or European record “smelled like freedom” and that Coca-Cola provided Russian youth with a “taste of freedom.” 23 March 2007.

⁵⁸ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-2.

⁵⁹ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 1038-39.

mindset would have a bearing on American foreign policy for the next 40 years, in addition to establishing a strict division between the arts of the two cultures.⁶⁰

Two resulting acts of the American containment policy were the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. The Truman Doctrine provided monetary support to Greece and Turkey to fight Soviet pressure and thus prevent Soviet expansion. The Marshall plan, a program designed to provide broad economic aid to European states on the condition that they would work together for their mutual benefit, followed. Although Soviet countries were invited to join, the central government forbade any of its constituent countries to take part in the agreement.⁶¹ This event illuminated the distrust that the Soviet government felt towards the West and further isolated the Communist East from the Capitalist West.

Memories of previous invasions colored the perspective of Soviet leaders: Western European powers had invaded Russia twice in the nineteenth century and already twice in the twentieth. This historical memory logically put Stalin ill at ease. Stalin's response was to build and unify the Soviet Union, and block out foreign influences and internal criticisms, an effort that eventually affected the arts. In 1949, he began eliminating the multiparty systems, and required the other subject governments in Eastern Europe to adopt and impose his policies, which included military cooperation with the Soviet Union, the collectivization of agriculture, and Communist Party domination of education.⁶²

⁶⁰ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 1039.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1040-41.

⁶² Ibid., 1041-42.

By 1955, the division between “East” and “West” was codified through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, and that formal, political separation spilled over into an artistic division as well. An extension of the Marshall Plan, NATO was signed in 1949 and committed its member countries to mutual assistance in case any of them were attacked, thus solidifying a Western bloc. The Warsaw Pact of 1955, on the other hand, codified the Eastern bloc, which was to be under direct Soviet domination through local communist parties controlled from Moscow and intimidated by the presence of the Red Army.⁶³ From this moment on, the delineation between “East” and “West” in the political sphere had been made.

As the Cold War continued, both sides underwent changes in political leadership that had a significant impact on the official treatment of the arts, particularly in the USSR. On 5 March 1953 Stalin died, ending his reign within the Soviet Union. By 1956, Nikita Khrushchev became premier, taking over for the fallen leader. The Khrushchev era witnessed a retreat from Stalinism by allowing intellectuals to express their opinions more freely and allowing for internal criticism of the government. In the famous “secret speech” of 1956, Khrushchev informed the Congress of the Communist Party of the abuses perpetrated by Stalin, and he labeled Stalin a “blunderer as well as a killer.”⁶⁴ Khrushchev, while decidedly anti-Stalin, was definitively pro-communist and advocated a return to the Marxism-Leninism of the past.⁶⁵ Although Khrushchev solved some of the problems associated with the Stalin regime, he largely ignored many others, and in the process, relaxed some of the cultural censorship that had restricted import of

⁶³ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 1044.

⁶⁴ Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 339.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

the arts.⁶⁶ His other policies, however, led to his forced resignation in 1964 and the installation of Leonid Brezhnev as the dominant figure in the Soviet Union.⁶⁷

Unlike his predecessor, Brezhnev was much more restrictive than Khrushchev had been in the realm of cultural importation from the West and political critique from within the Union, hinting at a return to Stalinism. As historian Robert Service points out, “Brezhnev’s stabilization of politics and administration after the upsets of Khrushchev also led him to clamp down on cultural freedom.”⁶⁸ This new ideology can be seen in the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968, which allowed the Soviet Union to interfere in the domestic politics of other Communist countries, and in the practice of cultural repression within the Union itself.⁶⁹ Ironically, Brezhnev’s restrictions gave rise to reactionary, dissident movements amongst the Soviet people, most notably the very youth from whom Brezhnev was attempting to limit artistic experimentation and consumption.⁷⁰

Brezhnev would continue to lead the Soviet Union until 1982. Thus, it is under his rule that disco entered the USSR and Boney M crossed into its restricted borders. The complex history of the Cold War, only a few highlights of which are laid out here, shaped the subversive curiosities and longings in the Soviet fan base that found outlet in the disco song “Rasputin.” Brezhnev’s return to almost Stalinistic practices created the social unrest necessary to inject “Rasputin,” a novelty project from an entertainment-

⁶⁶ Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 354-4.

⁶⁷ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 1052.

⁶⁸ Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 380.

⁶⁹ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 1052.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1063.

focused disco producer and a hastily assembled band, with a powerfully subversive agency.

The cultural history of the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union within the larger political scheme of the Cold War infused disco with differing meanings and representations for its many different audiences. What represented a response to rock in the United States became another Western import to fans within the USSR. What represented a black sound, voice, and style in the United States was a commercial product with a wide and hungry audience in Europe. Developing in a manner congruent to other European disco groups at the time, Boney M went on to achieve super stardom, but along the journey became entangled in this political and cultural web. The primary questions that emerge from these contextually informed perspectives is how Russia and Russianness was represented musically, formally, and performatively in “Rasputin,” and how the song became a produce with subversive power to a particular audience that was, in fact, Russian.

Section III: Composing and Constructing Russia

Frank Farian yearned for a commercial success that would span the world. He believed that by fusing European and “exotic” musical elements into Boney M’s hits, global notoriety was possible.⁷¹ These hit songs most often took the form of either reggae-infused European hits such as “Rivers of Babylon,” or reggae hits with a Western, disco flavor (for example, Bob Marley’s “No Woman, No Cry”). His approach to “Rasputin,” while motivated by the same urge to capture worldwide attention, was fundamentally new and different. In “Rasputin,” Farian eschewed his conventional formula of Caribbean reggae, dance, and Afro-diasporic associations, and instead constructed a set of cultural references that, to the western ear of his current audience, were Russian. Sonic, visual, and textual markers impart the associations and fit into the cultural and political Western landscape of the late 1970s in a powerful way. In particular, the modal inflections, open contrapuntal interaction of the voices, exotic instrumental timbres, and rich visual images come together to create a musical product that is imbued with a sense of distance and “otherness.”

The primary musical marker of exoticism and “Russianness” in “Rasputin” is its modality. As Locke, Bellman, and other musicologists who have written extensively on exoticism have pointed out, modality is often a primary signifier of the musical alterity.⁷² By utilizing modes other than major and minor, a composer can suggest foreign locales

⁷¹ Goldman, “Babylon by Limousine,” 39.

⁷² Locke, “Exoticism.” Locke, “*Samson et Dalila*,” 263. Bellman, *The Exotic in Western Music*.

and the distant past. “Rasputin” effectively evokes both of these possibilities; not only is Russia represented as a foreign place, but the music also hearkens back to the era before the codification of common practice tonality and into a time of folk styles.

My analysis of “Rasputin” begins by mapping the modally inflected melodic lines that occur throughout. The interactions and resulting contrapuntal effect of those melodic segments reveal a preponderance of perfect intervals, with a corresponding affect of both time and place. The “exotic” instrumental timbres employed by Farian, in conjunction with the visual images of the 1979 music video for “Rasputin,” reinforce the other characteristics and result in a song that is at once clearly disco and clearly located outside the semiotic norm for the genre.

“Rasputin” is in a standard verse-chorus form, employing both a prechorus and bridge, as well as an extended coda (Table 1). It begins with a lengthy instrumental introduction before the first of three verse-prechorus-chorus complexes begins at time 1:06.⁷³ A short instrumental interlude (1:54) provides a sectional division before the next verse-pre-chorus-chorus unit. An instrumental bridge, at 2:57, begins with a male voice-over, imitating the sound of an old radio news broadcast. Finally, at 3:34, the third and final verse-prechorus-chorus unit begins, followed by an additional repetition of the chorus and concluding with a final vocal tag of “Oh, those Russians.”

Within the introductory material and music of the verse and prechorus, there are numerous melodic gestures that suggest a Dorian/Aeolian modal framework. Musical figures exploit the lowered seventh scale-degree, which opens a hermeneutic window to interpretation from an exoticist perspective. It would be highly problematic to say that all

⁷³ Timing are taken from the music video version of “Rasputin”

0:00 – 1:06: Introduction	2:40 – 2:57: Chorus
0:00-0:12: Percussion texture	RA RA RASPUTIN
0:12-0:20: Guitar adds	Lover of the Russian Queen
0:20-0:36: Synthesized Balalaika adds	There was a cat that really was gone.
0:36-0:44: Balalaika removed from texture, Second guitar adds	RA RA RASPUTIN
0:44-0:51: Chorus chanting “Hey” adds	Russia’s greatest love machine
0:51-0:59: Bass guitar with chant continuing	It was a shame how he carried on.
0:59-1:06: Strings add, chant stops	
1:06 – 1:22: Verse	2:57 – 3:12: Bridge (voice over)
There lived a certain man, in Russia long ago,	But when his drinking and lusting and his hunger for power became known to more and more people, the demands to do something about this outrageous man became louder and louder.
He was big and strong, in his eyes a flaming glow.	
Most people looked at him, with terror and with fear,	3:12 – 3:34: Chanting of “hey” with instrumental interlude
But to Moscow chicks, he was such a lovely dear.	
	3:34 – 3:49: Verse
1:22 – 1:37: Pre-Chorus	“This man’s just got to go!” declared his enemies,
He could preach the bible like a preacher,	But the ladies begged, “Don’t you try to do it, please”
Full of ecstasy and fire.	No doubt this Rasputin, had lot of hidden charms,
But he also was the kind of teacher	Though he was a brute they just fell into his arms.
Women would desire.	
	3:49 – 4:05: Pre-Chorus
1:37-1:54: Chorus	Then one night some men of higher standing,
RA RA RASPUTIN	Set a trap, they’re not to blame.
Lover of the Russian Queen	“Come to visit us” they kept demanding
There was a cat that really was gone.	And he really came.
RA RA RASPUTIN	
Russia’s greatest love machine	4:05 – 4:22: Chorus
It was a shame how he carried on.	RA RA RASPUTIN
	Lover of the Russian Queen
1:54 – 2:09: Instrumental Interlude	They put some poison into his wine.
	RA RA RASPUTIN
2:09 – 2:23: Verse	Russia’s greatest love machine
He ruled the Russian land, and never mind the Czar,	He drank it all and said, “I feel fine.”
But the Cossak-chok, he danced really wunderbar.	
In all affairs of state, he was the man to please,	4:22 – 4:39: Chorus
But he was real great when he had a girl to squeeze.	RA RA RASPUTIN
	Lover of the Russian Queen
2:23 – 2:40: Pre-Chorus	They didn’t quit, they wanted his head.
For the queen he was no wheeler dealer,	RA RA RASPUTIN
Though she’d heard the things he’d done.	Russia’s greatest love machine
She believed he was a holy healer,	And so they shot him till he was dead.
Who would heal her son.	4:39 – 4:41: “Oh Those Russians”

Table 1: “Rasputin,” song form as performed on the video.

modal popular music evokes the exotic (there are certainly plenty of examples in folk, rock, country, and blues that do not qualify), but in this case, the modality is coupled with the other musical elements that, in combination, enhance the exotic signification of the modality. In that context, the pronounced absence of a leading tone fosters interpretations both of an exotic locale and of a distant past.

The piece centers around the pitch “D,” and the prominence of the motive C-natural to D places the opening figure in a modal musical space, congruent with “primitive” pre-tonal practices. This is the same set of associations that musicologist Mosco Carner notes the “deep-seated psychological relation between primitive music and exoticism” in his investigation of Puccini’s operas.⁷⁴ The precise mode of the piece is at first ambiguous, but gradually emerges as Aeolian. Examples 1 – 5 show the melodic segments of the introduction, verse, and prechorus of “Rasputin,” in which these modal inflections appear.



Example 1: Guitar Ostinato (beginning at 0:12)



Example 2: Melodic Figure of Synthesized Balalaika (0:20)

⁷⁴ Mosco Carner, “The Exotic Element in Puccini,” *Musical Quarterly* 22 (1936): 47.



Example 3: Melody of Strings (0:59)



Example 4: Melody of the Verse (1:06)



Example 5: Melody of the Pre-Chorus (1:22)

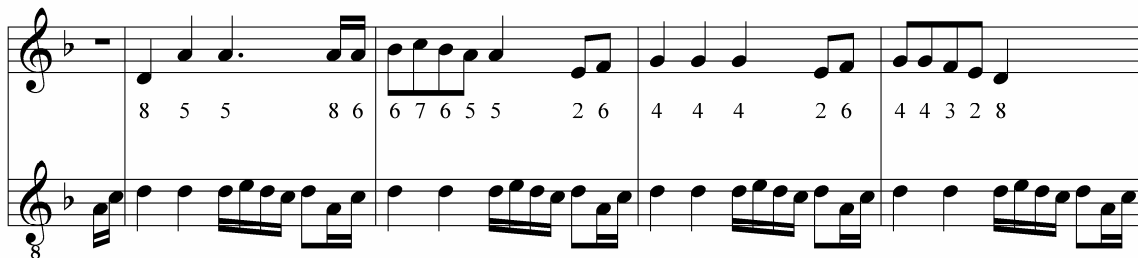
Each additional musical layer of the introduction and verse further supports an Aeolian framework. The first melodic segment of the ostinato (Example 1) exploits the whole tone between C and D, but does not contain scale-degrees three or six. The material of the second melodic figure further solidifies the D Aeolian mode by introducing F and B-flat to complete the pitch collection. Each melodic layer in the piece reinforces the Aeolian sense with the exception of the prechorus's melody (Example 5), which employs a leading tone, reminiscent of the melodic minor mode. The terminal function of the leading tone is subverted, however, as it leads through the D up to E, creating a half cadence as opposed to an authentic one.



Example 6: Melody of the Chorus (1:37)

A shift to the Mixolydian mode infuses the chorus with an even greater sense of “otherness,” exoticism, and within the context of the rest of the piece, “Russianness” (Example 6). This shift from Aeolian to Mixolydian is accomplished by the use of B-natural and, more importantly, F-Sharp, which is sonically juxtaposed with the F-natural in the listener’s memory that was prominent in the prechorus. In effect, it creates a layering of exoticism. The opening melodic material sets up an exotic, yet at times familiar, context before transitioning to a completely foreign modal framework, made more pronounced by its sonic distance from the opening modal sounds.

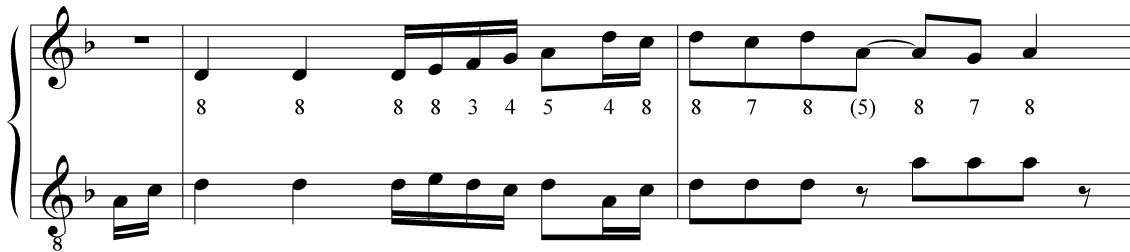
The fact that the instrumental introduction and the verses of “Rasputin” are in the Aeolian mode, while its chorus is in the Mixolydian mode, generates a gradual realization of the musical sense of “otherness” on the part of the listener. The beginning is modal, but hints at Western tonality, and even shifts to the melodic minor before the chorus. This allows the listener to hold on to a sense of tonality, before the modal takeover in the chorus.



Example 7: Interaction of Ostinato and Balalaika Melody (0:20)

A second component of “otherness” in “Rasputin” is the perfect interval content of the contrapuntal interactions between the musical lines, which also subverts tonality and distances the work from traditional Western practice. The lack of harmonic thirds leaves these intervals with a quality best described as contrapuntal “openness.” In the

contrapuntal interaction between the bass ostinato and the first melodic line (Example 7), the first three intervals of the line are perfect: an octave followed by a fifth that repeats. The result is a sense of tonal openness with the absence of a mediant tone. While there is the occasional non-perfect interval in the second measure of interaction, the phrase cadences on a fifth, again a perfect, “open-sounding” interval. The latter half of the melody (m.3) is similar to the first, but sequences down a step – thus emphasizing G as opposed to the previous A. As a result, the fifths that were so prominent before become fourths, both intervals favoring a harmonic palette removed from familiar, modern Western tonal practice. The interaction of the lines leads to a cadence on an octave – again a perfect interval, again hollow and open in effect. The general feeling of the passage is one of harmonic ambiguity – at least from a triadic, Western perspective. The non-reliance on thirds and sixths reinforces a non-Western and stereotypically primitive musical space.



Example 8: Interaction of Ostinato and String Melody (0:59)

The interaction between the guitar ostinato and the second melodic phrase (Example 8) provides a similar contrapuntal openness. There are many perfect intervals between the two lines, with the octave both opening and closing the phrase as before. To achieve this, however, the bass ostinato is slightly changed, with a leap to scale-degree five.

There is limited contrapuntal interaction in “Rasputin,” with the excerpts sketched in Examples 7 and 8 being the only instances where two musical lines interact. However, both cases are consistent in their uses of open intervals. The resulting effect is a harmonically ambiguous amalgamation of perfect consonances. This effect sets the listener in a non-Western harmonic world that furthermore hearkens back to early music before the common practice period, when thirds and sixths became the harmonic staples and anchors for Western music.

The open counterpoint of “Rasputin” is exceptional in comparison to other Eurodisco hits. Donna Summer’s repertory (perhaps the quintessential representation of European disco), for example, reveals a harmonic language primarily comprised of triads. Two well-known illustrations of the trend are “Love to Love You, Baby” and “Bad Girls,” both of which employ rich voicings of complete triads to harmonize the music as is the norm in the style.⁷⁵ ABBA, another famous European disco group, also performs music in a triadic idiom, yielding imperfect intervals in the contrapuntal scheme. “Dancing Queen,” perhaps ABBA’s most famous recording, employs a theme that begins on the mediant tone – immediately establishing the piece’s major tonality.⁷⁶ Complete triads continue to be used throughout the song to fill out the harmonic framework. As well as “Rasputin’s” open counterpoint being unusual among other Eurodisco stars in the 1970s, the musical idiom is also rare within Boney M’s output. Other hits such as

⁷⁵ Donna Summer, *The Journey: The Very Best of Donna Summer*, New York: UTV records, 1975 and 2003, R 658718.

⁷⁶ ABBA, “ABBA Gold: Greatest Hits,” New York: Polar Records, 1992, 314517007-2.

“Rivers of Babylon” and “Daddy Cool” tend to be more triadic in harmonic content, matching the stylistic norm.⁷⁷

As already discussed, the issue of modality and flat scale-degree seven is not unique to “Rasputin,” Boney M, nor Eurodisco. Many folk, rock, country, and pop musics employ the lowered seventh in a variety of melodic and harmonic guises. Instead of being a specific exotic signifier in and of itself, the subtonic instead allows for an exotic reading when other musical characteristics are considered in combination. If the leading tone were consistently present in “Rasputin,” the alternative signifiers of “other” would lose their semiotic potency.

One may wonder whether the open counterpoint and modal inflections of “Rasputin” are specifically Russian, or simply representative of some non-descript Other. These characteristics are traditionally recognized element of Russian folk songs. Russian folk scholar Vadim Prokhorov points out that most Russian folk songs are either in the Aeolian or Mixolydian (both modes used in “Rasputin”). Additionally, the accompaniment of most folk song are based on fourths and fifths – which are the intervals seen in the two-voice contrapuntal analysis of “Rasputin.”⁷⁸ Other ethnic folk musics, however, employ similar harmonic and melodic devices. Therefore, these musical signifiers are not themselves specifically Russian; it is only in conjunction with the textual, timbral, and visual elements of “Rasputin,” that the specific locale of this exotic other is fixed as Russian.

⁷⁷ Boney M, “The Greatest Hits,” New York: BMG, 2002, B00005RTAY.

⁷⁸ Vadim Prokhorov, *Russian Folk Songs: Musical Genres and History* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 9-11.

Further enhancing the signification of Russia in “Rasputin” is the lyric content of the song. The song’s protagonist, Rasputin, was a controversial figure closely associated with the Romanovs (the last ruling family of Imperial Russia) until his murder in 1916. Rasputin’s alternately flamboyant and mysterious personality prompted a rich web of posthumous myths, many of which are played upon in the verses of “Rasputin.” Grigory Rasputin is perhaps best known today as “the mad monk,” though he was neither mad nor a monk. He was an intelligent, spiritual person, but ultimately amoral.⁷⁹ Attributed with psychic powers, Rasputin was also believed to have the power to heal, a trait that kept him in good graces with the tsar, whose son was hemophilic.⁸⁰ Rasputin was viewed as “a study in wickedness; he is a hypnotist, who casts his spell over the innocent women he seduces and who leads Russia and its besotted rulers to revolution and ruin.”⁸¹ Part doctor, part mystic, part Don Juan, the figure of Rasputin grew into such a controversial figure that censors forbade any mention of him of in public, though newspaper editors often ignored this edict because an article on Rasputin would, through its public appeal, more than financially make up for the fine. After his murder in a St. Petersburg palace in 1916, the myth of Rasputin continued to propagate and evolve.⁸²

Museums, novels, films, and pop songs have all been vehicles for the Rasputin myth in the West.⁸³ Very little was taught about Rasputin to the Soviet youth in the

⁷⁹ Brian Moynahan, *Rasputin: The Saint Who Sinned* (New York: Random House, 1997), ix.

⁸⁰ Kagan, *The Western Heritage*, 847.

⁸¹ Moynahan, *Rasputin*, x.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ix.

⁸³ Harold Shukman, *Rasputin* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1997), 1.

1970s, and plays or books dealing with the historical figure were traditionally banned.⁸⁴

Boney M's hit was another medium for propelling the Rasputin myth to Europe.

Focusing on his sexual prowess and governmental insubordination, the lyrics provide a narrative for the main points in the Rasputin fable.

Rasputin is characterized through the lyrics of the song as a powerful figure with a superhuman sexuality. He is "big and strong" and viewed by the public "with terror and with fear."⁸⁵ Even the Russian government could not match Rasputin's power since "he never mind[ed] the Czar." He is also given the title of "Russia's greatest love machine;" "to Moscow chicks, he was such a lovely dear" and "was real great when he had a girl to squeeze." The focal points of the Rasputin myth are all distilled in the lyrics of "Rasputin," but none as prominent as Rasputin's seductive powers – a fitting topic for a disco hit.

The lyrics are interwoven with several effects that bolster the "Russianness" of the piece. The first set of voices heard, for example, is a chorus chanting the word "hey," evocative of the iconic Cossack warriors of Russian history, an association made explicit by the reference to a "Cossack-chak" in the second verse. The song ends by asserting its Russianness and consequently otherness one last time through the spoken tag "Oh, those Russians," suggesting an "us as opposed to them" dichotomy.

One of the aspects of "Rasputin" that is most suggestive of a Russian soundscape is the choice of instrumentation and manipulation of musical timbres. The song opens with twelve seconds of percussion and hand clapping. Drums play in rapid succession,

⁸⁴ Interview with Russian scholar Radislav Lapushin, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 23 March 2007.

⁸⁵ See lyric transcription on page 30.

with the hands clapping a three eighth-note motive beginning on beat one. The resulting rhythmic drive in tandem with its repetitive structure evokes a sense of the “primitive,” promoting bodily responses in the form of dance.

“Rasputin” further synthesizes sounds of Russian instruments to move the song from a non-descript exotic locale to one that is more specifically Russian. This is perhaps most evident when the song employs a synthesized sound evocative of a balalaika. The balalaika, arguably the most iconic of Russian folk instruments, is a plucked chordophone with a long neck, triangular body, and three strings. The first mention of the balalaika dates to 1688, and Peter the Great is thought to have used balalaikas in his grand orchestral procession of 1715. In 1886, the instrument began to be viewed in an artistic light, as opposed to its previous reputation as a folk instrument. Its unique tone enchanted many Russian performers and composers, including Tchaikovsky who described it as “timbrally indispensable.”⁸⁶

The balalaika enters the texture performing the melodic segment of Example 2, solidifying the setting of the song in a non-Western locale, specifically Russia. It carries the melody for twenty seconds while being accompanied solely by percussion and the guitar ostinato described earlier, before progressing to a chorus chanting the syllable “hey,” in a manner to evoke the image of Cossack dancers.

Boney M’s aural evocation of Russia in the ears of the West is paralleled by an even more suggestive visual display. The music video (1979) contains images of Boney M’s trip to Russia juxtaposed with a concert performance of “Rasputin” in what appears to be a German nightclub. The images of Boney M in Russia concretely reveal the

⁸⁶ Martin Kiszko, “Balalaika,” *Grove Music Online* (accessed 12 March 2007) <<http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu>>.

locale, whereas the performance footage further signifies Russia through both costumes and stage mannerisms.

The music video of “Rasputin” opens with an image of St. Basil’s Cathedral, located at the southern edge of Moscow’s Red Square—one of the most iconic and familiar landmarks of Russia in the Western imagination.⁸⁷ The still image of the cathedral is not a picture, however, but a 3-D graphic representation (Example 9). Immediately following the image of St. Basil’s Cathedral is a sequence of Boney M deplaning in Moscow. The subsequent montage, lasting 44 seconds, portrays the group frolicking in Red Square, playing in the snow, and being photographed by a mob of paparazzi. There is additionally a prolonged segment in which Bobby Farrell struts across the Red Square. The sequence ends with a final succession of rapid photographs of the group.



Example 9: Frame of “Rasputin” Music Video (0:01)

⁸⁷ Boney M, “Rasputin,” Music Video (accessed 4 April 2007) <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=kvDMLk3kSYg>>.

That the video uses real images from Boney M's tour in Moscow is significant: these images are the only actual representations of Russia given to the listener/viewer (the rest are exotic signifiers) and they furthermore embody a historic event as Boney M was the first music group allowed to film a music video in Red Square.⁸⁸ The narrative and locale depicted in the opening sequence of the music video clears up any potential ambiguity regarding the Russian nature of "Rasputin."



Example 10: Frame of "Rasputin" Music Video (1:55)

After the initial 44 seconds of footage in Red Square, the video cuts to a live performance of Boney M performing "Rasputin." Marcia Bennett assumes a pose with her arms folded, one on top of the other without crossing, evoking the stereotypical image of a Cossack dancer. At various points throughout the music, the entire female trio of Boney M uniformly assumes this position (Example 10).

⁸⁸ "Boney M Start Russian Rock Revolution," *Melody Maker*, 23 December 1978, 4.

As the live performance sequence begins, the costuming of the band is immediately striking. All four are dressed in Arabian-like costumes (evoking a general sense of the exotic), complete with Central Asian hats, pants, and vests. To further exoticize the visual image, Farrell dons a fake beard to begin the performance of the song (Example 11). When he is not singing, Farrell joins the female trio in their imitation of Cossack dance, moving around the stage kicking out his feet in a style that resembles a stereotypical Western conception of a Russian folk dance.



Example 11: Frame of “Rasputin” Music Video (1:17)

The images that appear during the live performance are markedly different than the footage in Red Square. The concert contains visual signifiers evoking Russia, whereas the footage from Russia explicitly confirms the Russian nature of the song. The stereotypical manifestations of Russian dance and clothing are again in the exoticist

idiom with no desire for authenticity, but rather, an attempt at representing a non-Western space.

In both the sonic and visual realm, Farian's Boney M layered exotic references and signifiers throughout "Rasputin." These signifiers were selected for maximum impact on a Western audience. The stereotyped Western perspective influenced decisions in musical elements, costumes, stills, and dance moves. When all of the aforementioned elements were put together, the result is "Russian" to the Western point of view.

Section IV: Russian Reception of “Rasputin”

Disco’s explosion onto the Russian music scene was a welcome change to the former dominance of rock for the Kremlin. Whereas the government feared the infiltration of Western rock music because of its perceived rebellious sentiment, disco was well received via formal policies as a Western cultural product officials believed could be more easily manipulated for Soviet purposes. Restrictions on the release of Western music albums were relaxed for the genre in 1978, and Boney M was invited to perform in Moscow. Disco was a medium through which Soviet youth presumably could consume a Western cultural product, while simultaneously remaining firmly under Soviet ideology in the eyes of the Kremlin, a conclusion of the *diskoteki* conference in Riga in 1976. With the release of Boney M’s “Rasputin,” however, the Soviet relationship to disco, both from the government’s perspective and the growing audience’s perspective, grew more problematic. “Rasputin” was officially censored, but this act imbued it with a subversive agency that disco songs had not yet known amongst its audience, and fueled the desire of Soviet disco fans to hear “Rasputin.”

Soviet Youth and Western Culture

For many Russian youth, especially those discontented with life in the Soviet Union, Western cultural products represented a glimpse of a better life. In Andrea Lee’s memoirs from a ten-month trip to Russia in 1978-79, she reveals this sentiment through

anecdotes of different people she encountered on her trip. She first notes the excitement elicited by a bootlegged copy of a disco tape that her friend Grigorii possessed:

Grigorii owns a tape player, and his pride and joy is an incredible grainy third-hand recording of Donna Summer's "Love to Love You, Baby." He plays it constantly, to the delighted horror of his friends, who appear to see Donna Summer's protracted orgasms as the symbol of alluring Western vice.⁸⁹

This depiction illustrates an "alluring" Western cultural product and the obsession it fosters. Perhaps more importantly, it also takes note of the extremely poor sound quality of the recording. Despite the "grainy" sound, it is still one of Grigorii's most prized possessions. The disconnect between sound quality and appreciation of the product suggests that the cultural value of the tape was not sonic (by modern standards), but also tangible. The sonic product itself is appreciated for its elusiveness, but the physical artifact carrying the music was also cherished in its own right.

The importance of the physical object is further expressed by Radislav Lapushin, Professor of Russian Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in his memories of life as a teenager in the Soviet Union during the 1970s.⁹⁰ He described the excitement associated with obtaining a new bootleg copy of a rock recording (his then-preferred genre of music). Even thirty years later, he recalled the incredibly poor sound quality, which made the artist almost indiscernible at times. But to the teenage Lapushin, that bootleg represented the "sound of freedom," and the precious physical cassette tape or LP emitted the "smell of freedom." The rock music as sonic object seemed secondary to the political significance of owning the bootleg. In each case, however, both the sonic

⁸⁹ Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal* (New York: Random House, 1979), 13.

⁹⁰ Personal interview with Radislav Lapushin, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 23 March 2007.

and physical manifestations of the music were valued both as banned cultural objects and glimpses into a Western way of life.

The investigation of the Soviet youth's reception of Western culture becomes multi-layered as Lee collects observations from other native Muscovites. Describing a conversation with her friend Valerii, Lee notes:

Valerii shares in the very fashionable contempt that I have seen several young Russians display toward anything native to their country. "It's the best kind of dance band," I heard him say once. "They don't play a note of Russian music." Attitudes like this prevail in his fast circle of friends, most of whom, like himself, are young native Muscovites of a "middle-class" background.⁹¹

In conjunction with valuing Western cultural goods, there is a crucial counter-feeling of Soviet disdain. For the fans, western music became desirable not only because it is Western, but also more generically because it was not Russian. Lee enhances this point with a description of a Moscow discotheque blasting the soundtrack to John Travolta's 1977 film, *Saturday Night Fever*:

Later that night, as the big sound system thumped out the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever*, we tried to explain the plot of the film to Valerii... "What amazes me about Westerners, especially you Americans, is the freedom with which you move," he said. "You're not worried about what anybody might say. Russians couldn't move like that." He frowned suddenly, ran his fingers through his hair, and said, "Why am I always speaking such dirt about Russians? Now you see what happens to us kids. We turn on to Western stuff and start to hate ourselves."⁹²

The depiction of the ultimate embodiment of commercialized Western disco being blasted in a Moscow dance club reemphasizes the connection between the West and freedom that was perceived by many Soviet youths. Valerii's comments suggest that for some, Soviet oppression had crippled morale so much that hatred of all things Soviet

⁹¹ Lee, 106.

⁹² Ibid., 109

resulted. This attitude not only manifested itself in a dislike for Soviet artistic products, but also in a general self-deprecation of one's Soviet identity.

“Rasputin” Enters the Political Realm of Rock

With the entrance of disco into the Soviet Union in 1976, an official compromise seemed to have been reached regarding Western popular music. Soviet youth who were so inclined could now have easier access to Western music, but mediated through the Kremlin, as recordings of disco were legitimately available through the state-controlled *Melodiya* label. Not all consumers of Western popular music in Russia jumped on the disco bandwagon, however. Similar to the debates in the West, some avid rock fans were adamantly opposed to the new disco music, and the underground culture that fetishized rock persisted. In general, however, the tensions between the Soviet government and the importation of Western pop relaxed. That is, until “Rasputin” appeared on the scene.

The 1978 release of “Rasputin” in the US and Europe (coupled with its shortly thereafter bootleg “release” in the Soviet Union) problematized the disco situation in the USSR. With musical elements that could be interpreted as parodying Russian music, coupled with tongue-in-cheek lyrics regarding an already controversial Russian historical figure, “Rasputin” likely raised numerous red flags with Soviet officials. This concern motivated the Soviet government to ban “Rasputin” both in recorded formats and in performance as demonstrated in the Boney M concerts of that year where Soviet audiences cried out for the song each night, but to no avail. Boney M tried to explain that they were not allowed to perform the song, but the Soviet translator construed the situation to seem that Boney M just did not have time to perform all of their hits.⁹³ This official sanction, however, did not thwart “Rasputin's” circulation in the Soviet Union.

⁹³ “Boney M: Red Hot in Russia,” 3.

Instead, the recording thrived in bootleg culture amplified in significance by the audience's crying out for its performance upon Boney M's visit.

In some ways, the censorship of "Rasputin" did more harm than good for the Soviet goal of suppressing politically harmful material. Presumably censored for its lyric content about a figure from Imperial Russian history, "Rasputin's" parodistic subject points would not have been understood by the majority of its consumers. English education was not part of the Soviet curriculum and therefore few Russian fans spoke English during the Cold War.⁹⁴ However, an overwhelming degree of fluency is not needed to understand that the phrase "RA RA RASPUTIN" refers to Rasputin. So while the song's focus on Rasputin would have been evident, the perpetuation of myths surrounding his life (and the more subtle literary interpretations of the text) would have been understood by fewer Soviet consumers. Although the Kremlin perhaps thought that the lyrics of "Rasputin" would bring up forbidden topics and emphasize unflattering moments in Russian history, that realization was highly unlikely. Therefore it was predominantly the censorship of "Rasputin" that gave it the subversive agency, not necessarily the song's textual content. Certainly, some highly educated consumers of disco, like many of Lee's consultants, might have recognized the "cosmopolitan in-joke" of a Western song over-exaggerating the already hyper-mythologized story of Rasputin, but the vast majority would have remained ignorant to it.⁹⁵

Censoring "Rasputin" and aligning it with the bootleg culture associated with rock politically charged the song. Most cultural products gain a degree of political weight and desirability when associated with the underground culture of illegal copying.

⁹⁴ Lapushin.

⁹⁵ Lee, 52-53.

The production of bootleg copies represents a hijacking of the modes of production by those not sanctioned to have a say in the official process, which consequently imbues the bootlegs themselves with an element of subversion. In other words, bootleg copies signify the youth's taking over of an aspect of culture over which the State traditionally held power (i.e. Popular music production).⁹⁶ Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel also discusses such subversion in *Cassette Cultures*, describing the underground tape community in Northern India from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Through his analysis, Manuel suggests that underground tape cultures represent an “emancipatory use of media,” characterized by a decentralized production center and the empowering of each receiver as a potential transmitter. This empowerment, in turn, creates a “democratic-participant” mass media.⁹⁷ Within this framework of interpretation, bootleg culture posed a blatant threat to the Soviet government simply by its grass-roots network that connected disenfranchised fans to each other and empowered them through insider communications.

The circulation of cassettes was only a small piece of the larger underground bootleg culture, however. Literature, film, theater, and even scientific discoveries were all fair mediums for censorship in the Soviet Union during these years.⁹⁸ Additionally, the region presented a new brand of censorship to the world. The censorship was not institutionalized, meaning in these cases that it was universally known, but not

⁹⁶ This is similar to the subversive agency associated with mix tape culture as well. “Thoughts on the Politics of the Mixed Tape,” *Art of the Mix* (accessed 26 March 2007) <<http://artofthemix.org/writings/politics.asp>> (unsigned).

⁹⁷ See Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4.

⁹⁸ Marianna Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg, ed., *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

acknowledged by the government officials. It further differed from traditional government-supported censorship in that it not only involved banning and preventing the release of certain documents, but also served a proscriptive function by enforcing the dissemination of desired information and cultural products to the public.⁹⁹ This culture of censorship, which resulted in the phenomena of samizdat (the distribution of forbidden literature via bootleg copies) and tamizdat (manuscripts smuggled out of the Soviet Union and then published abroad for non-Soviet readership), was a fundamental aspect of Soviet life and influenced every realm of the arts, including popular music.

In the case of “Rasputin,” an almost self-fulfilling prophecy resulted. The Soviet government worried that a song parodying the myth of a controversial Russian figure would be embraced by Soviet youth as a subversive product and, consequently, censored it. In practical consideration, the song was unlikely to have any more subversive agency than other disco hits, as the majority of consumers would not have understood most of the lyric content of the song. Once “Rasputin” was censored, though, it was empowered with the subversive agency granted to songs with bootleg status, and thus the very situation the government was seeking to avoid sprang into being. This subversive power, coupled with the difficulty of accessibility, perpetuated the teenaged fans’ desire to hear “Rasputin,” which resulted in a situation where the Soviet youth latched on to a song about a controversial figure in Russian history as a method of governmental subversion, just as the government had feared.

Conclusion

Upon the election of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, tensions between the Soviet Union and the West began to dissipate. Radical reform programs such as *perestroika* and

⁹⁹ Cholden and Friedberg, *The Red Pencil*, xv.

glasnost redirected the USSR's future, and motivated the 1989 declaration of the end of the Cold War between Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush. Only two years following, the Soviet Union disbanded. By that point in history, however, disco was no longer a viable cultural product either in the Soviet Union or in the United States. Its prominence quickly eroded in the 1980s, as did the commercial success of Boney M. Farian continued producing, leaving behind Boney M and taking the form of a newly discovered duo. With this new group, Milli Vanilli, Farian again saw moderate success. That story ended with controversy, however, when the fact that the group did not actually perform their own songs but instead lip-synced on their album was revealed. In the ensuing scandal, Milli Vanilli lost their 1989 Grammy for "Best New Artists."¹⁰⁰ It remains to the historian of disco to appreciate the irony in the situation for Farian—the same performance formula had led him to smashing success with Boney M, but in the next incarnation, the approach led to fans' outrage. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, the culture of disco provided the perfect arena for Farian's brand of synth-pop to thrive all around the globe, and the political surroundings of the Cold War propelled Boney M's "Rasputin" to a success it may not have otherwise known.

The impact of that one song ran far beyond its sales figures and chart presence, and into the very core of issues of musical exoticism, transmission, and confluences of music and politics. The Cold War era provided a cultural web in which a Western musical product, employing exotic musical markers signifying Russia, could travel across the Iron Curtain and be welcomed as a subversive artifact by a specific subculture of Soviet dissidents in the USSR within teen fan culture. This case study of "Rasputin"

¹⁰⁰ Jon Pareles, "Wages of Silence: Milli Vanilli Loses a Grammy Award," *New York Times*, 20 November 1990, sec. C, p. 15 and 22.

illustrates how popular music, with its charge to entertain and provide escape and expression for its fans, also acquires meaning and significance as a soundtrack of larger cultural, political, and creative forces.

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