



Creme Records

Russia has returned and Moscow leads the way for its music recording community. **ZENON SCHOEPE** reports on a studio that has played no small part in the country's cultural history.

I T IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK of Russia without at least mentioning the years of oppression that gripped it. So much of what you see today can be referenced back because everything is inextricably linked. Only very young children are lucky enough to have missed out on it. Progress is a relative term and when you have emerged from a good number of decades under Soviet rule you can understand why the Russians are a wary and careful breed.

Predictably this applies to the recording community because until relatively recently there were only the state run interests, nothing else existed. Officially. People did record outside the system but they did so under considerable risk to themselves, faced with the sort of petty and vindictive bureaucracy that would just as readily lock them up as take their equipment. That's why visiting Creme Records in Moscow is such

a humbling experience as it represents the very crucible of defiance against a regime that would not allow people to listen to what they wanted.

It won't take your breath away and you'll be disappointed if you expect some Western European A-room flagship. Creme Records operates a two-room facility that majors on functionality and flexibility. When you hear the stories and appreciate the difficulties, it'll start to grow on you.

Creme Records is the current owner of the space in a separate building at the back of small college campus for performing arts that has a remarkable history.

The person best qualified to talk of the studio's genesis has nothing directly to do with Creme, technically he's a competitor, but there's a 'pull together' mentality evident among audio pros in

Moscow that some other recording capitals would do well to note. Alexander Kutikov is one of Russia's best know musicians as he is bass player in one of Russia's best known bands – Time Machine. He's also a successful producer and engineer, he produced all the Time Machine albums, and works with a varied roster of artist for his own Synthesis Records. He also runs his own Polyfon studio in Moscow, which could be regarded as a rival to the one at Creme.

However, he connects to the Creme studio site because it was here that his own career started and the city's independent studio community got going.

The studio was first opened as part of the performing arts college in the mid 1970s and was created to serve as a training area for its students. It was used for producers working on radio programmes and for actors practicing voiceovers. Alexander joined



initially as a cleaner because there were no proper jobs available, despite the fact that he had more than eight years' experience in live sound.

'What drove me was a desire to record rock music, which, incidentally, was banned at the time,' laughs Alexander. He started to produce recordings of bands, including Time Machine, that were drawn to the facility but that's an oversimplification.

'What we were doing was absolutely illegal, which ever way you look at it,' he says. 'We had to record at night. During the day we operated as a training studio for the students and one of the most difficult things was getting rid of all the bottles and debris that was left over from the night sessions without drawing attention to

ourselves. This studio was where a number of extremely important underground records were made by the most important bands of the time. Most of the bands are still together, which I think is significant.

'You have to remember that at the time there was only the one state record label and as we weren't supposed to exist we duplicated and sold the tapes on ourselves,' he continues. 'It was hard but we were successful in getting the music around. These underground bands became famous even though the sales were not profitable.'

Despite its significance, the studio's glory was short-lived and it was shut down in 1979 by the KGB – although the official line was that it was closed by

the Fire Department who deemed it 'unsafe'. While it was refurbished fairly quickly for continued use as a supplement to the college's activities, it wasn't reopened for music recording until Creme Records took over in 1996.

'By 1980, which was the year of the Olympic games in Moscow, the situation changed and some of the bands who recorded here, including Time Machine, got the chance to start working "officially",' says Alexander.

'The original records were restored and rereleased and the first Time Machine album is still one of the best selling records in Russia despite the fact that it was recorded in 1978.'

Things may have changed but the situation was never simple. They had to contend with those characteristically unreasonable swings of mood that the Soviet system became famous for. They had to endure press campaigns against rock music, instigated by Komsomolskaya Pravda in 1982, and it wasn't until 1986 that cultural politics began to loosen up. In the light of all that went before, it is not surprising that people remained suspicious.

However, during those years Alexander and members of other bands started up their own studios and kick-started the independent recording scene.

In 1996 the studio was completely refitted by new owners Creme Records using local Russian designers to bring it up to modern music standards. And it's been a success since it reopened in 1997.

According to studio manager Vlad Sorokin the plan of the facility is very much as it was in its early days, with two control rooms and two recording areas, and boasted surprisingly good isolation due the thickness of its walls and general layout.

Of the two live areas the bigger one employs a mixture of surfaces to give an flexible space for overdubs, ceiling height is particularly useful, while being big enough for band recordings. The smaller control room has been adapted for tracking and small projects with more than a nod towards post oriented work. Pride of place is a Mackie Db8, a desk that was chosen for its convenience and automation as much as for its compact dimensions, according to Vlad.

'With the Russian market being the way it is, it is important to keep your options open,' he said. 'Modern technology is constantly moving and when

While Alexander has his own studio he clearly still likes the vibe at Creme, as much for the history as for the modern equipment. 'The recording industry in Russia is very limited in finance so to have a place as well equipped as this in Moscow is a real achievement,' he says. 'We have an enormous piracy problem in Russia so it extremely difficult to make money as a legitimate record label.'

Aside from his own work with Time Machine, he's enjoyed considerable chart success with acts he discovered and produced. 'I go to clubs to see what's going on and pick up on trends. That's extremely important for me at my age and believe me it gets harder!' he says.



'Eight years ago I was still drinking vodka and beer but now I drink only good red wine, so you can see how things can change.'

According to Alexander, it's a bad time to be in the studio business. 'It's better than it has been but the amount you can charge compared to the time you have to spend does not add up to a living. There are crazy people in this business who love their work and what keeps them going is the hope that it will get better. That's why you have to grind your teeth and suffer, but we know about that in this country.'

Alexander states that piracy remains the major problem, and one he describes as a State problem. He says that there are enormous contradictions between the political posturing towards piracy and the economic interests of those doing the posturing. He believes it will take enormous changes in legislation to break this circle.

Western music has had a big impact on Russian tastes and has spawned a raft of copycat Russian acts, according to Alexander. 'This is diluting the originality of Russian music and it's alienating it from the people,' he explains. 'I am very aware that the gap between the standard of Russian musicians and those in the US and England is very big. I worked in a studio in the US in 1988, which is where I witnessed it first. The difference was that the Americans play rock'n'roll and the Russians play rock'n'roll-style.'

He blames this on the economic pressures suffered by Russians and the continuous oppression. 'The blues came out of the oppression of slavery, but blues is the music of a free spirit regardless of the situation,' he says. 'The Russian spirit has been caged for decades and our music sounds like it.'

we buy we have to make sure that we choose well.'

It's paired to the ubiquitous Pro Tools rig plus a video transport and has the smaller live area available to it when required.

While the Mackie room may be representative of small rooms all over the world and clearly fills a requirement in the Moscow market, the main control room is to a completely different scale. While aesthetically restrained, the emphasis here is clearly on function and the refit from 1996 has not masked the fact that this is an old room with a bit of history behind it.

Monitoring is courtesy of a Genelec 5.1 system with 1038s at the front and 1032s at the back plus a Genelec sub. It represents the biggest Genelec system in an independent music recording studio in the country.

The multichannel system is employed for experimental work in DVD and for language dubbing of foreign films. This type of work accounts for a small percentage of the studio time, which is concentrated on music recording, but it is a reliably lucrative line to be in for those occasions when it arises.

'Genelecs were chosen on the recommendation of the Russian distributor A&T Trade who showed how popular these monitors now are elsewhere in the world,' explains Vlad. 'That's important to us. They've also been a popular choice with producers as you'll now find smaller Genelecs in a number of studios around Moscow.'

The studio deals with all Creme Records' artists as well as being available for outside hire. Vlad states that they refuse to specialise in musical genres and are set up for all styles. 'When the market is tough there is no point in making things harder for yourself,' he says.

The equipment choices were made with this in

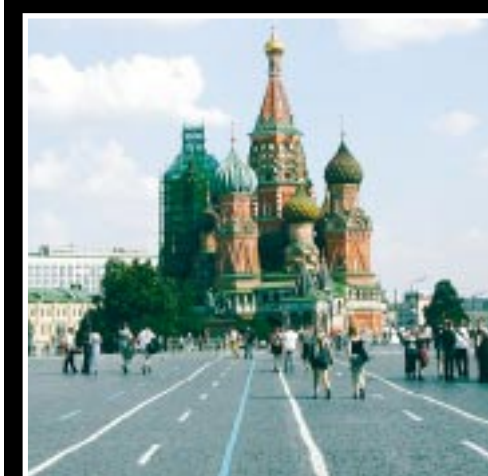
mind. The main control room's Pro Tools is supplemented by Tascam MDMs and fed through an Otari Elite desk. The outboard racks house GML EQs and high-end Eventides along with a good selection of desirable dynamics boxes and you'll find Neumann and Rode mics on the stands in the live areas.

What Creme demonstrates is that there is clearly a market for this type of facility at this type of level in Moscow. It also demonstrates that they are far more adept at cutting the cloth to fit the budget than their

Western counterparts are – in fact they are comfortable with it and positively thrive on it. There is a lesson and a warning in that. ■

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That's not to say that the whole experience is now devoid totally of the occasional glimpse of Soviet charm, and I don't doubt that progress 100km outside the city and out in the provinces is less brisk, but the Muscovites have come along enormously. Broadcast, post and music recording output will be consumed. As so many have predicted, Russia has enormous potential as an audio market.

While a lot of attention has been paid to Asia, and China in particular, as a source of future 'opportunity' to the West, many in the pro audio community are overlooking Russia and the former Eastern Bloc.

I last visited Moscow in 1992 and found things pretty much as imagined, a predominantly Soviet experience despite the very thinnest of veneers reflecting the changes that had recently occurred. The prospect today is completely different and you'll eat well and pay Western prices in and around the city centre and encounter well stocked supermarkets, designer label fashion stores, and a population that is clearly in to the concept of consumerism. Despite the sensationalist reports, it is difficult to believe that all well-dressed young men and women are the offspring of gangsters. They're young professionals benefiting from an influx of trade, mostly. Significantly, the Russians have fallen back in love with their history and heritage and poured money back in to architecture and presentation.