

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2009

Russian Musicians Yearn for Fans Abroad

By ERIC PFANNER

After belting out "The Party's Over," the Russian pop singer Valeriya let loose with a sound bite meant for music industry executives gathered at a recent conference in Cannes: "Music has no borders!"

For the likes of Mick Jagger or Madonna, that may be true. But only a small handful of Russian artists has ever managed to cross the musical frontier between their country — where the market is dominated by domestic acts — and the West.

Now Valeriya and several other Russian rockers are trying to change that by fine-tuning their repertoires for audiences abroad. Meanwhile, Russian record companies are wooing cautious Western partners to sell their music in Russia.

Over all, music sales fell 21 percent in Russia in the first half of last year, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, a trade group. The decline probably accelerated in the second half of the year as the economic crisis intensified.

The Russian music market has long been plagued by piracy. Most of the compact discs sold there are unauthorized copies, and digital sales are virtually nonexistent. Because of that, Russian artists rely largely on live performances to make money.

To try to make money despite piracy, Western record companies are starting to experiment with a business model that has been the norm in Russia for years, with a single company handling artist management, merchandising and other functions in addition to releasing records and publishing music.

And for Russian artists, selling their work outside of Russia has become a business imperative.

"I don't want to stay still," said Valeriya, whose real name is Alla Yurievna Perfilova, during a meeting with journalists in Cannes, France. "I offer a very competitive repertoire, and the audience can feel something new."

Valeriya is not the first Russian pop star to break out of Russia. But she is an established, 40-

year-old singer who has been described as a Russian version of Madonna. So she and her handlers are thinking big, planning a multipronged assault on the British and American markets.

By the end of the month her label, Nox Music — run by her third husband, Josef Prigozhin — plans to send copies of a single, "Wild," to 300 clubs and D.J.'s in the United States, to test the audience for her music.

Vladimir Voronkov, who manages Nox outside Russia, said he wanted Valeriya to do an American tour, get on talk shows and even publish a translated version of her autobiography.

"The more buttons you press, the more results you might get," he said. "No stone unturned." Easier said than done. Despite a publicity blitz that landed Valeriya on the covers of magazines and the features pages of Sunday newspapers in Britain, Nox Music is still scrambling to find a distributor for the British release of her newest record, "Out of Control."

Valeriya is not the only Rus-



ERIC GALLARD/REUTERS

Valeriya, called the Russian Madonna, has international plans.

sian artist seeking to make it in Britain. A Moscow D.J., Leonid Rudenko, plans to release a dance track, "Everybody," in Britain on Monday via Ministry of Sound, an independent record label.

Another Russian hopeful is Sergey Lazarev, a former boy-band star who has embarked on a solo career as, yes, Sergey. His Russian label, Style Records, recently reached an agreement

with a British management company, 2 Point 9.

"It's really, really difficult to break an artist, even a British artist, in the U.K.," said Billy Grant, managing director of 2 Point 9. "The idea is to work toward creating a record that could be released in further territories around the world."

Russian artists have generally worked with independent labels because major Western music

Rockers are dabbling outside the insular industry in Russia.

companies remain wary about doing business in Russia.

Without the backing of a major record label, Russian artists will have a hard time making it big in the West, said Artyom Troitsky, a Russian music critic and producer. He said the prospects for Valeriya in the West were "hopeless."

Mr. Troitsky said that in a world awash with slickly produced but largely derivative pop music, Russian acts should stand out. "It would be funny," he said, "if the country that was famous for Tchaikovsky would become known only for producing third-rate Madonnas or second-rate Robbie Williamses."

Others are more optimistic.

"We have the feeling that the international community is ready for an artist from Russia," said Ilya Buts, the editorial director of the Russian edition of *Billboard* magazine.