

A Belarusian Music Producer About Doing Show Business in Belarus

A little insight on how show business is done in Belarus. For rock and indie music the conditions are quite hard in Belarus, where there is no developed market and infrastructure and where the radio stations are under state-pressure and self-censorship. Despite that, modern bands keep existing and appearing in Belarus just as in any neighbouring country and often become recognized abroad. Sadly, sometimes they get better recognition overseas than in Belarus.

Papa Bo: "We can develop in Belarus only by earning abroad"

By Taciana Šachnovič for Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi – Papa Bo, also known as Aliaksandr Bahdanaŭ, 23 years old. Twelve of them he studied at two music schools in the class of domra, cello, violin and piano. His father – a Russian poet – lives in the Rostov region of Russia. His mother is a school teacher of chemistry and biology. According to his passport, Papa Bo was born in Mačulišчы. After graduating from music schools he entered the Philology Faculty of the Belarusian State University. But he only studied there for a short time: informal musical subculture took more and more his time. At first, as there were no stages available, he organized so-called House concerts. Now under his patronage are the bands Serebryanaja svad'ba, Cassiopeia, Petlia Pristrastija, PortMone, Addis Abeba, RockerJocker, Botanik Project, Sergei Pukst and Pukst Band, Nagual, CherryVata, Vom, Mokh, Sibarity. – Once upon a time, two young progressive-minded boys took themselves just for fun the nicknames Papa Bo and Don Ochen and in their dreams divided the city of Minsk in two parts. And though childhood is long gone, the nickname for Aliaksandr Bahdanaŭ remained the same – Papa Bo. And he now controls

13 Belarusian groups performing alternative music. Last summer Artemiy Troitskiy (a famous Russian music producer – transl.) appreciated his efforts by granting him the Steppenwolf Music Awards, ignoring several experienced and well-known Russian producers. The hero himself does not consider himself a producer. "I just earn money, as it is well known that any sh...t can be made popular", confessed Aliaksandr. "But the main criterion here is my own musical taste. If I like it, I'll put in the original music time, money and knowledge. This group, which for many years cooked in its own juice, they are at no similarity and produce a product that reflects their vision of good music, not a vision of the masses." **"In the club there sits the club owner who knows nothing about music"** Five years ago, Papa Bo got engaged in administration of the band Nagual, with which he visited many places of the Post-soviet area and Europe. "A club in Belarus is a discotheque premises, where there sits the club owner who knows nothing about the cultural life and the latest music trends. I suggest to him: 'We want to organize a concert of a certain well-known group. We guarantee that 500 people will come.' 'Why should I? – the owner answers. – I would rather pay \$30 to a local DJ and get a thousand students drinking vodka at the bar. Why do I need your hairy hippies?..' Once we came to the art director of one of the famous Minsk clubs and offered to organize a concert of TequilaJazz (a famous Russian rock-band – transl.). He didn't know anything about them. When I explained that it was a famous rock group, he perked up: 'Oh, let's give on their arrival a party in Latino style, with salsa, cactus everywhere and sombreros!..' At the same time, I only need one phone call to organize a concert of the Belarusian band Serebryanaja svad'ba in Moscow: 'Hi, we'd like to come to you in March...' We come to Moscow and see our posters all around the city, the club is well equipped and has an experienced sound engineer. We give the concert and take 90% of ticket sales. At the same time we know that the remaining ten per cent were spent on

advertising and the sound engineer. Everything is transparent and clear. In Minsk we get the same club without a scene, without lights and sound. For just getting the empty space we have to pay \$1000. There is zero payback. It is almost impossible to earn money on concerts. Perhaps in 5 to 10 years something will change. But today we can develop here only because we earn abroad.

"Belarusians do not need anything?" – You used to talk about having a mission: to bring real music to the Belarusian masses. – I've had enough of that. The last club concert I organized in Minsk was Students Day. Only twenty people have then bought tickets for the concert of Serebryanaja svad'ba and two bands from St. Petersburg at the Minsk Concert Hall. I ended up with a loss of five thousand dollars. – Who are the most successful of the bands you manage? – As long as the situation with concerts is the way I described – people just don't come to these concerts! – I plan to do only Serebryanaja svad'ba, which is profitable. Today, out of 13 teams only Serebryanaja svad'ba, Nagual, Cassiopeia and Addis Abeba break even. At the moment Serebryanaja svad'ba is the only band, besides Liapis Trubeckoj (the well-known Belarusian band – bielar.us), that lives off of concerts. Mostly concerts outside Belarus. This project, which is not really in demand in Belarus, but is adored around the world. For New Year we are going to Slava Polunin (a Russian clown – bielar.us), who lives in Paris. That's because Polunin is a fan of Serebryanaja svad'ba. In spring of last year Serebryanaja svad'ba gathered a full Minsk Concert Hall. The hall was packed with about one and a half thousand people. The band played the concert and earned for that... one hundred dollars in total. While in Moscow it can earn more than ten times more. In Belarus the legal framework and possibilities do not allow to do normal business on that. Therefore you do not want to work here. **"Success through conformism"** – So what are you doing here, drowning

in the Belarusian swamp? – Yes, I am really drowning. But I can not, roughly speaking, just drop 50 musicians who are counting on me. I can not tell them: 'Guys, so long, I'm leaving for Switzerland!' Because about half of them do not know how to use a the computer. The other half I just recently bought cell phones so that they were in touch. Musicians do not have the expertise to promote their music to the masses. They are people who live in their own worlds. So now I'm trying to introduce such a working scheme that would enable the machine to work independently under my distanced control. After that I plan to leave the country, because I'm bored and depressed here. – But there are prospects here. – I do not want to wait for them. Why waste your nerves and resources to beat my head against the wall? I'm, of course, still nervous, but less than earlier. – It turns out that in Belarus there is practically no demand for alternative music. Why then pull the cargo, which no one needs? – Alternative music is needed here, just yet by fewer people. For example, I am sure that a 80% of the female population of Belarus are potential listeners of Serebryanaja svad'ba. But to succeed here you need to adapt. – The rock band Petlia Pristrastija is today very popular in Moscow but virtually unknown in Belarus... – Yes, unknown. Here rock music must be played in Belarusian language. Even the [Russian speaking] band J:Mors started singing in Belarusian. There are rock bands who want to succeed, and there are rock bands who want to bring their own music to the people. I want to bring out the music of my friends, and the band J:Mors wants to succeed. But this does not mean that we are better and they are worse. It's just that everyone has his own goals. – Rock in Belarusian language is more in demand? – To some extent, yes. This musical wave has formed an own specific target group. And if you want to succeed, you need to adapt. But conformism is alien to us (smiles). I do not have this sickness of being a patriot, in the conventional sense of the word. I don't get pathetic about it and I don't understand people

who believe that a Belarusian band should sing only in Belarusian language. After the festival Mozhno, which I organized in Moscow and where ten Russian-speaking Belarusian music groups performed, I was overrun by critics: "What a shame, how can a non-Belarusian-speaking band represent Belarus abroad?" This position is so typically Belarusian: better to criticize someone instead of doing it yourself. **"To change the country one place could be enough"** – Why, instead of Moscow, don't you make a festival in Minsk? – Paradoxically, but in Moscow it is easier for Belarusians to hold a festival. Having paid for a giant bus, for food, a lot of advertising and fees. If I did it here without sponsorship, as I did in Moscow, the festival would fail. Therefore, there surely will be a festival here, but only after I find sponsors for it. Because I'm not a billionaire. – What does have to change so that you'd change your mind and stay in Belarus? – There must be a concert site, a club. One place could be enough to change the country. In every European country there is one most famous club, where the main cultural events take place. If it were possible to completely run such a place in Belarus, then I have an idea how this place could be brought up to an international level. And if there would be such a place, then life would go on.

// Translated by Bielar.us. See [Original article \(in Russian\)](#)