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/// The Sexy Voice of Perestroika:

**The Intersection of Rock Music, Politics, and Sexuality
in the songs of Nautilus Pompilius**

Abstract

This article explores the cultural and political significance of the Soviet rock band Nautilus Pompilius, situating their work within the broader socio-political and cultural shifts of late Soviet Sverdlovsk. Emerging from the vibrant local rock scene, the band distinguished itself by blending socio-political critique with themes of love, sexuality, and human connection, capturing the emotional complexities of Perestroika. Using frameworks such as *spatialization*, *cognitive modeling*, and *conceptual blending*, this study examines the metaphorical language and implicit socio-political meanings in Nautilus’s oeuvre. Through an analysis of selected songs, “Bound by One Chain,” “Striptease,” and “I Wanna Be with You,” the article reveals how the band’s lyrical hero—shaped by the interplay of poet Ilya Kormiltsev’s intellectual depth and frontman Vyacheslav Butusov’s enigmatic performance—navigated the quest for personal and collective agency, the erosion of socialist ideals, and evolving gender and sexual norms.

In the 1980s, the landscape of Soviet rock was essentially split between two distinct poles: Moscow/Leningrad and the Urals. Former Sverdlovsk, today’s Yekaterinburg—the largest city in Ural, though barely known in the West—played an important role in the social and political life of the late Soviet Union. Despite its location thousands of miles from the capital, it was not a peripheral, passive, or inert urban area. On the contrary, it was home to some of the key figures of perestroika and the 1990s, all of whom inarguably shaped Russia in their respective spheres: Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, Alexey Balabanov, a cult

film director, Ilya Kormiltsev, a celebrated rock poet, and a pleiad of rock bands that included Urfin Juice, Chaif, and Nautilus Pompilius. The paths of these politicians, intellectuals, and creatives crossed organically in the cityscape and led to disparate outcomes in politics and the arts. Pondering the latter in his memoirs, Kormiltsev remarked philosophically, “Besides rational social history, there is also the story of mystical revelations.”¹ To determine what falls into the realm of history and what into that of mysticism, this article takes a closer look at the musical culture that developed in Sverdlovsk during the 1980s, and specifically at Nautilus Pompilius, who led the music charts of perestroika.

Unlike many of its contemporaries who eschewed personal topics, Nau, as fans often referred to Nautilus Pompilius, layered love and sexuality with political critique in a way that mirrored and shaped public sentiment. This article will begin by exploring the cultural context of their rise and then proceed to the lyrical and thematic depth of their work. Through an analysis of selected songs, and drawing on frameworks such as spatialization, cognitive modeling, and conceptual blending, it will examine the ways in which the band used musical and lyrical techniques to evoke intimate emotional responses while embedding subversive messages. These methodologies provide a lens for understanding how Nautilus navigated censorship, reflected societal tensions, and connected with audiences on an intensely personal level.

The study relies heavily on Ilya Kormiltsev’s memoirs and publicistic writings as primary sources, focusing on his insights into the band’s creative processes, cultural environment, and societal critiques. By tapping into his poetry, the article illuminates the lyrical sophistication that underpinned Nautilus’ music, emphasizing how Kormiltsev’s words captured the emotional and intellectual complexities of perestroika.

= = = The Cultural Context of Soviet Rock and the Scene in Sverdlovsk

To understand the distinctive role Nautilus Pompilius played, it is essential to first survey the cultural and political context of the Soviet rock scene in the 1980s. Due to unofficial self-publishing entities known as *samizdat* and *magnitizdat*, even peripheral areas of the USSR were never far removed from the influence of the alternative facts and trends penetrating the Soviet empire from the West. Alexei Yurchak observes that *magnitizdat* played a pivotal role in establishing Western rock music as the dominant, albeit unofficial, cultural force among Soviet youth in the 1970s. Bootleg Western music and broadcasts from Voice of America sparked a cultural shift, inspiring new forms of creativity among youth. By the late 1970s, this cul-

1 = = Ilya Kormiltsev, *Velikoye rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Agentstvo politicheskikh novostey, June 20, 2006, Part 1, <https://www.apn.ru/index.php?do=authors&author=392>.

tural ferment had led to the rapid growth of a vibrant local rock scene that became a defining feature of the era's nonconformist artistic expression.²

According to Kormiltsev, the rock community in Sverdlovsk was most deeply affected by Led Zeppelin. The lyricist regarded the British quartet as the quintessential band of the 1970s, embodying the hopes, aspirations, and tensions of their generation while breaking away from the values of the previous era.³ He likely sought to emulate this vision by shaping Nautilus Pompilius into a Soviet counterpart for the transformative perestroika period.

Like many incipient musicians of that era, the members of Nautilus Pompilius first met at a college club—one of the many organizations at Soviet universities that catered to a wide range of interests and activities. These clubs nurtured creativity, fostered well-rounded development, and built lasting friendships among their members. Since young musicians practiced on the property of local universities, the institutions often asked them to use their talent for the benefit of local communities, inviting them to perform at receptions and dispatching them to entertain students during mandatory agricultural labor. By providing space, resources, and even built-in audiences, state-funded institutions inadvertently supported the development of rockers' performance skills. Paradoxically, the very establishment that sought to regulate culture ended up legitimizing and fostering what was considered a non-official cultural sphere.

The state's cultural gatekeepers, including members of Komsomol, were not immune to the desires of youth. Like their peers, they wanted to have fun and enjoy both trendy music and the culture associated with it. Rockers, in turn, were willing to collaborate with sympathizers from the state apparatus. As Yurchak contends, "nonofficial culture depended on the ability of its producers to manipulate the official sphere," and party officials often failed to enforce stringent censorship because they "did not care to check."⁴ He recounts how several rock concerts organized in Leningrad by Komsomol in the early 1980s were officially presented as "Komsomol cultural-mass activities."⁵ Such events, he explains, were made possible through elaborate strategies of pretense employed by both the producers of nonofficial culture and local Komsomol activists.

In 1983, the Sverdlovsk Komsomol organized a rock seminar—today remembered as a massive state-funded party—that was both overflowing with liquor and attended by the region's most progressive and trend-setting crowd. Few partici-

2 = = Alexei Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife," in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, edited by Adele Marie Barker (Duke University Press, 1999): 83.

3 = = Ilya Kormiltsev, "Ot avtora," *Vzlot i padeniye svEntsovogo dirizhablya* (Vestnik, 1997).

4 = = Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids," 84.

5 = = Yurchak, "Gagarin and the Rave Kids," 84.

pants approached the lectures and speeches in a state of sobriety. Groups for evening jams were formed ad hoc; whoever was still capable of playing and singing simply joined forces on stage.⁶ Despite its chaotic nature, the seminar proved invaluable to networking, sharing records, discovering local projects, and fostering connections among the region's musicians.

Kormiltsev recounts an incident that occurred in the summer of 1982, while he was collaborating with Urfin Juice. In the process of trying to record higher-quality copies of their recent album, the artists learned about the existence of two foreign record players in the city. One belonged to Andrey, a member of the rock community, and the other to his girlfriend Tatiana. During one of the evenings Kormiltsev spent with Andrey in a kitchen-type recording studio in Tatiana's apartment, her father popped in for a drink. He proposed a toast to the two youths, proclaiming "you will be very useful to us in the future."⁷ Had Tatiana's father been a typical industrial worker, in retrospect, this friendly tribute would not have led to any controversy. But industrial workers typically did not own foreign record players. The man was evidently someone of importance who had access to resources inaccessible to most of his townsmen. Indeed, he was no other than Boris Yeltsin, a high-ranking local party official at the time, whose daughter was one of the youngsters fascinated by trendy underground culture.⁸

Yeltsin became favorably disposed towards Russian rock, at least from a bureaucratic perspective; indeed, he even backed the establishment of an official rock club in Sverdlovsk in 1986, complete with a public venue and state funding.⁹ This move undeniably contributed to the growth of rock culture in the region. However, as Kormiltsev later argued, this support was less an act of charity than a calculated investment by a member of the rising political elite, for Yeltsin and his allies transformed "the rage of poets" into a political commodity that served their struggle for power.¹⁰ Responding to later criticism that accused Russian rock of being complicit in the destruction of the Soviet empire, Kormiltsev admitted, "we

6 == Ilya Kormiltsev, "Pantykin i 'Pereezd'," *Dostovernoye opisaniye zhizni i prevrashcheniy NAUTILUSa iz POMPILIUSa*, https://royallib.com/read/kormiltsev_ilya/dostovernoe_opisanie_gizni_i_prevrashcheniy_NAUTILUSa_iz_POMPILIUSa.html#o.

7 == Kormiltsev, *Rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Part 1.

8 == Kormiltsev, *Rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Part 1.

9 == Kirill Smolentsev, "Gde zarozhdalsya rok. Turisticheskiy marshrut po mestam Sverdlovskogo rok-kluba [Where rock was born. Tourist route around the Sverdlovsk rock club]," *AiF Ural*, October 5, 2020, https://ural.aif.ru/culture/kak_zarozhdalsya_rok_turisticheskiy_marshallut_po_mestam_sverdlovskogo_rok-kluba. See also Dmitriy Karasyuk, *Sverdlovskaya rok-entsiklopediya. "Ritm, kotoriy my..."* (Kabinetniy Ucheniy, 2016).

10 == Kormiltsev, *Rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Part 1.

were too naïve to understand that the future belongs to those who possess the monopoly on the interpretation of the present.”¹¹

Nevertheless, the cultural paradox of Komsomol’s tacit support for Soviet rock as well as Boris Yeltsin’s role in legitimizing underground music in Sverdlovsk created the conditions in which Nautilus Pompilius could thrive. Within this environment, the band developed its unique lyrical voice. Embodying “the rage of poets” against the loss of ideals and the hypocrisy of a society turning to bourgeois values,¹² Kormiltsev channeled his youthful non-conformism and philosophical outlook into penning lyrics that resonated deeply with his generation. As Nautilus Pompilius gained popularity, Kormiltsev himself went from being a kitchen poet to the poet of the stadium. Nautilus resounded from kitchen windows and dimly-lit porches across Russian cities and small towns, striking an emotional chord with its fellow countrymen navigating the complexities of change.

= = Balancing Pop and Protest

The Soviet rock community and its die-hard followers, often characterized by their preference for edgier and more rebellious musical expressions, were somewhat skeptical of Nautilus Pompilius. Their dubiousness stemmed from the band’s romanticism and musical style, which at times bore a resemblance to pop music—a genre not traditionally associated with the countercultural ethos of rock.

Artemiy Troitsky, who wrote the first history of Russian rock in the 1980s, identified the fundamental differences between Soviet and Western rock music. In Russian rock, he claimed, the emphasis lay on the lyrics since access to the modern equipment needed to produce a contemporary rock sound, such as electric guitars and keyboards, was limited. Moreover, the lack of a commercial music industry meant that musicians could not legally charge for their work before perestroika began easing restrictions on capitalist enterprise. Such constraints eliminated demand for danceable tunes and shifted the focus to the expression of ideas through lyrics. The texts of Russian rock songs thus became more sophisticated than those of Western ones, both stylistically and linguistically, resembling ‘serious’ academic poetry and maintaining a strong connection to the Russian literary tradition.¹³

Another notable difference, Troitsky claims, lay in the themes of the songs. Until the 1980s, Soviet rock bands avoided singing about love. As references to sex

11 = = Kormiltsev, *Rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Part 1.

12 = = Kormiltsev, *Rok-n-roll'noye naduvatel'stvo-2*, Part 1.

13 = = Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Faber and Faber, 1988), 40. See also Thomas Pond, „Soviet Rock Lyrics: Words That Matter,” *Popular Music and Society* 16, no. 3 (1992): 87–102, and Yngvar B. Steinholt, „You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 89–108.

were regarded as completely off-limits, priority was granted to socio-ethical and philosophical subjects, such as humans' lack of empathy, social passivity, conformity, and lack of faith. Lyrics could also express social commentary and satire.¹⁴ Despite its lyrical sophistication, however, Nautilus Pompilius broke with this tradition as it skillfully merged sociopolitical rhetoric with sexually suggestive meanings. The band harnessed emotion and sexuality to foster a sense of intimacy between the singer and listener, and to elevate public sociopolitical discourse to a deeply personal level.

Scholars such as A. V. Pugachova, E. A. Selezova, E. V. Isaeva, and E. A. Kozitskaya, whose works were consulted for this study, have analyzed Kormiltsev's poetry and Nau's lyrics from cultural and linguistic perspectives. However, for the most part, their contributions overlook the historical context in which these songs were produced. While Pugachova acknowledges a contemporary linguistic shift in focus from the internal structure of language to its relationship with other spheres of human activity, and admits that the meaning of words should be explored through cross-disciplinary analysis, she and the other scholars referenced here stop short of integrating historical analysis into their work.¹⁵ One should also note that a song is not limited to its lyrics; it is composed equally of music and performance, which can convey nuances beyond language and add layers of meaning or create spaces that shape interpretation.

= = = Artistic Identity and the Lyrical Hero

One point of agreement among the aforementioned scholars is that the lyrical hero in Nau's oeuvre is a constant—a complex yet consistent figure. The songs present this character as a straight male and socially engaged citizen. However, what previous scholarship has yet to explore is the reciprocity between this fictional figure and the band's repertoire, and the way in which the interplay of the two shaped the interpretation of the meanings embedded in their songs. This article addresses that gap by examining the dynamic relationship between the lyrical hero and the artistic choices of Nautilus Pompilius in the hope of offering a more nuanced understanding of their work.

The lyrical hero of Nau's songs was shaped by the contrasting personalities of Ilya Kormiltsev, the poet, and Vyacheslav Butusov, the frontman. A politically- and socially-conscious philosopher, Kormiltsev expressed his views in poetic meta-

14 = = Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 42–43. See also Yu. A. Chumakova, „Kontseptsiya lyubvi v poeticheskom tvorchestve rok-muzykantov,” *Russkaya rok-poeziya: tekst i kontekst* (Ekaterinburg: Tver State University, 1999).

15 = = A. V. Pugachova, „Yaderno-periferiynoye stroyeniye semanticheskogo polya, zhen-shchina' v poezii I. Kormiltseva,” *Visnyk Dnipropetrovskoho Universytetu, Series: Movoznaustvo* 18, no. 16 (2010): 287.

phor, while Butusov assumed the guise of an apolitical musician.¹⁶ When pressed about the meaning or sociopolitical implications of their songs during interviews, Butusov often avoided direct answers. He offered vague replies, turned his responses into anecdotes, diminished the significance of the songs, trivialized the creative process that went into them, or delegated all responsibility for them to Kormiltsev:

Then he [Kormiltsev] was bringing texts in batches, flames were dancing in his eyes, [he was] all worked up from that figurative anger, a kind of anarchist-regicide. It felt as though he had bombs against the existing system in all his pockets. It was a reaction to the environment in which all of us were in then. And we [musicians] generally existed as a separate independent cell, and Ilya was the only connection with the outside world.¹⁷

Kormiltsev lacked the gift to deliver his messages in ways that Butusov was physically and vocally capable of doing. The former recalled how the band's frontman had a nearly universal appeal, captivating audiences of all ages—from grandmothers to granddaughters—and that Nau's music was played so frequently that countless cassette tapes had gotten totally worn out.¹⁸ Seemingly reserved and endowed with aristocratic facial features and deep piercing eyes, Butusov had a breathy masculine voice that created a sense of intimacy between performer and listener. He appeared to audiences as a regular guy in town—as someone living in a local apartment block, going to college, drinking liquor in the courtyard, and chasing girls—and not as a strange Western “*metal*ist,” a spooky-looking fan of heavy-metal rock. This interplay between Kormiltsev's intellectual depth and Butusov's performative ambiguity further shaped the lyrical hero, reflecting the band's complex relationship with their audience and their era.

= = = Sound, Space, and Emotion

The spatial location in which a song is recorded or performed may add another layer of meaning or strengthen the theme within a musical or lyrical context.¹⁹ Analyzing selected Nau's songs, this essay draws on the work of Allan F. Moore, Patricia Schmidt, and Ruth Dockwray, particularly their research on sound placement analysis and the theory of cognitive modeling, which includes concepts such as image schemata and conceptual blending. According to this framework, spatial aspects

16 == E. A. Selezova, „Albom Razluka (1986) 'Nautilus Pompilius': liricheskiy sub'yekt i obraz ispolnitelya,” *Russkaya rok-poeziya: tekst i kontekst* 12 (2011): 156.

17 == Aleksandr Ustinov and Valeriy Zhuk, „Vyacheslav Butusov o sobstvennykh pesnyah” [Vyacheslav Butusov about his own songs], *Fuzz* 7/8 (July–August 1999), <http://naunaunau.narod.ru/articles/0511-butusov-o-pesnyh/>.

18 == Kormiltsev, “Vmesto Vvedeniya,” *Dostovernoye opisaniye*.

19 == Allan F. Moore, Patricia Schmidt, and Ruth Dockwray, „A Hermeneutics of Spatialization for Recorded Song,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 6, no. 1 (2009): 83.

of interpersonal and environmental relationships in recorded songs emerge from the interplay between the listener, the persona, and the personic environment, as well as from the social, public, or intimate distances between them.

Nau skillfully used spatialization in their recordings and performances to foster intimacy and evoke specific emotional responses from listeners. The album *Razluka* (1986), which shot the band to fame, opens with the Russian folk song of the same name—a tune traditionally sung during cozy domestic gatherings (*zastoliya*), where, after a number of vodka shots, people traditionally entertain themselves with song. The band recorded this opening track during such a gathering in the apartment of film director Aleksey Balabanov. This recording choice allowed Nau to build instant rapport with audiences across the country, evoking the familiar setting of a kitchen—a space often associated with intimate discussions of public and private matters in Soviet households.

Moore, Schmidt, and Dockwray provide a compelling framework for analyzing the metaphors and implicit messages in songs relying on two concepts in cognitive theory: *image schema*, that is, “a patterned way-of-knowing developed in our bodily experience of our world and translatable from one sense-domain to another,” and *conceptual blending*.²⁰ These ideas align with Daniel Levitin and Mark Johnson’s conceptualization of schemata. As Levitin argues, schemata “frame our understanding; they’re the system into which we place the elements and interpretation of an aesthetic object.”²¹ Johnson, in turn, suggests that schemata allow for abstract thought and the creation of metaphors that can be defined only in relation to certain domains.²² According to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, conceptual blending is an unconscious mental operation that occurs when “partial structures from two separate domains [*mental spaces*] are integrated into a single structure with emergent properties within a third domain.”²³

These cognitive methodologies provide valuable tools for analyzing the metaphors and implicit ideas embedded in the songs of the 1980s: a period that, while more liberal than previous decades, still left critics of the regime navigating the risks of censorship. Artists had to adopt creative strategies to exercise freedom of speech, often layering political messages within less conspicuous forms of artistic expression. Rather than delivering overt critiques that might draw the ire of state watchdogs, Kormiltsev opted for poetry that invited multiple interpretations. Resonating with this approach, Butusov responded to questions about the innuendos in Nau’s songs in his characteristically evasive manner:

20 == Moore et al., “A Hermeneutics of Spatialization,” 84.

21 == Moore et al., “A Hermeneutics of Spatialization,” 85.

22 == Moore et al., “A Hermeneutics of Spatialization,” 84–85.

23 == Moore et al., “A Hermeneutics of Spatialization,” 111.

I am satisfied with such kind of poetry, texts that lack specificity [*konkret-nosti*]. The mood is created [by the poetry], which gives way to emotions, associations. Everybody finds in these something of their own.²⁴

Nautilus' songs often employed spatial and cognitive techniques to bridge the gap between public and private experiences. By embedding political metaphors within carefully constructed environments, the band transformed their music into a multi-dimensional commentary on personal and societal struggles. This approach is evident in songs like "Bound by One Chain," "Striptease," "I Wanna Be with You," and "Bat".

This study also draws on Stephen Amico's insights into normative Russian masculinity and his claim that the construction of gender in Russian culture evolved in response to socio-historical changes and Western influence. Although patriarchal control was central to social stability in the Soviet Union, the enactment of masculinity was not unproblematic. Many men sought outlets in informal groups, while others attempted to assert their power through aggressive masculinity, domestic tyranny, or a retreat from familial responsibilities.²⁵

= = = Masculinity, Restraint, and the Collective Struggle

The challenges of masculinity are a recurring theme in many of Nautilus' songs, including "*Skovannye odnoy tsepyu*" ["Bound by One Chain"], which became one of the cultural symbols of perestroika. The song speaks about the alienation, economic struggles, and monotonous daily life of Soviet citizens who felt "bound by one chain." It exemplifies Kormiltsev's use of conceptual blending as he integrated the elements from different domains to create new, emergent meanings within his lyrics. Through its exploration of the personal and societal constraints faced by the lyrical hero, the song echoes themes of restrained masculinity and the limitations of individual agency, while highlighting the pervasive sense of social and political stagnation that characterized the era:

[Verse 1]

Mutual responsibility smears like soot,
I take someone's hand and feel the elbow,
I'm searching for someone's eyes and feel the look
Where the butt is above the head,
After the red sunrise follows the pink sunset.

[Chorus]

Bound by one chain
Chained by one aim,

24 = = Selezova, „Albom Razluka (1986),” 156–157.

25 = = Stephen Amico, "*Blue Notes: Gay Men and Popular Music in Contemporary Urban Russia*" (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 2007): 14-15.

Bound by one chain,
Chained by one...

[Verse 2]

Here joints are sluggish and spaces huge,
Here structures were crushed to assemble columns,
Some words are for kitchens, others for streets,
Eagles are traded for broiler chickens.
And I pose even kissing, in alignment with...

[Chorus]

[Verse 3]

You can believe, having a lack of faith,
You can do, doing nothing.
The poor pray, praying for
Their guaranteed poverty.
Here you can play to yourself on the tube
But it does not matter how you play as you are playing retreat.
And if there are those who come to you,
There are those who will come after you.
Also...

[Chorus]

[Verse 4]

Here women are looking for something but find only old age,
Here the measure of work is fatigue,
Here there are no villains in offices made of leather,
Here the first looks at the last,
And no less than the last, might be tired of being...

[Chorus]²⁶

The song became emblematic in its depiction of an authoritarian society that functions in the manner of an assembly line, codifying and controlling each aspect of its citizens' behavior. It is also economically ineffective ("you can do, doing nothing") and ideologically outdated ("you can believe, having a lack of faith"). The lyrical

²⁶ = = The lyrics analyzed in this study were translated by the author. The original Russian lyrics can be accessed at <https://genius.com/>.

hero feels isolated (“I take someone’s hand and feel the elbow/I’m searching for someone’s eyes and feel the look”), restrained in both public and private (“I pose, even kissing, in alignment with... bound by one chain”), but his feelings are shared by many of his compatriots (“here the first looks at the last/and no less than the last might be tired of being bound”). The chain, a recurring motif, operates on both a literal and metaphorical level, representing not only physical and emotional constraints but also the ideological bonds that tie citizens to an outdated system. The chorus references “aim,” [*tseľ*] but the term remains undefined and open to multiple interpretations. It could allude to the popular Soviet slogan “Our Goal is Communism!”—once a powerful motivational phrase and a shared cultural code that required no explanation. However, in the society depicted in the song, the phrase seems to have lost its potency, functioning merely as a hollow buzzword.

In a 1988 interview with *Yunnost* [Youth] magazine, Kormiltsev explained the meanings of “chain” and “aim” as follows:

... this is a composition about today which differs from yesterday due to a greater awareness that some changes in our life are hindered by factors not so much external as internal. Here it’s not so much about someone being chained, but about some kind of involuntary fraternity between those who are at one end of this chain and those who are at the other.

Today there are fewer illusions regarding the idea of an allegedly “harmful” layer [in society] eliminating which would be enough for everything to go as it should. It has become obvious that neither beautiful words nor even new laws will save us by themselves if society does not mature to implement them.²⁷

Resonating with the new lyrical and musical style of its album *Razluka* [Separation] (1986), through which “*Skovannye odnoy tsepyu*” became a hit, Nau arrived at its signature stage image. The look of the performers, previously animated and clown-like, changed to quasi-militaristic, manifesting bodily constraints that ran counter to the free spirit and free speech embedded in their songs.²⁸

= = Sexuality and Political Protest

Nautilus’ exploration of gender dynamics and sexual liberation often served as a vehicle for broader sociopolitical critique. The 1980s saw the conflation of two major phenomena that came out of the closet and into the streets: political criticism and sexuality. Breaking with the Soviet rock tradition, Nau skillfully intertwined romantic and sexual imagery with reflections on sociopolitical issues. Kormiltsev pushed the limits of traditional views on sex by incorporating into his lyrics elements like

27 == Interview with Ilya Kormiltsev, *Yunnost* [Youth], no. 6 (1988). Excerpt available in *Tvoe Vremya* [Your Time], <http://www.ytime.com.ua/ru/50/1334>.

28 == Kormiltsev, “Premiera Pesni,” *Dostovernoye opisaniye*.

public striptease, role play, and fantasies of bondage and domination, intensifying the provocative nature of the band's songs.

Much like Tsoi and his band Kino, Kormiltsev and Nautilus Pompilius were concerned about the threat of nuclear war during a time of heightened geopolitical tension and the lack of consensus on the arms race between the two superpowers. The song "Striptease"—included in the socio-politically charged album *Knyaz' Tishiny* [Prince of Silence] (1989)—reflects the anxieties of the era, capturing the ambivalence to the political situation and the collective fear of catastrophe. The composition emerges from the intersection of sexual and political liberation, nudging listeners to take a bold stand against militarism and apathetic world leaders. Within the context of sociopolitical protest, it explores how masculinity is intertwined with political power and examines the role of femininity within this dynamic:

[Verse 1]

Butchers drank the sea of beer,
Butchers gobbled up the piles of bacon,
Butchers fucked the whole city,
This is not enough for them, this not enough.
And when, when the storm is coming,
They look where to place their chairs
To see how the Antarctic tornado
Tears apart and throws up our hands and loins.

[Chorus 1]

Hey! Strip naked!
Go out into the streets
And I will suppress my jealousy
If that is needed in this case.
Strip naked! Hey!
Let them be surprised,
Let's pretend that they do not see you
But they will never forget,
Their thoughts will invade your body.
Undress!

[Verse 2]

We started morning with vodka,
We ended coming in bed at night.
And it is difficult, it is difficult to hide in the shadows
And to be silent and wise.
The bony children of the desert

Knocking on doors and asking for leftovers.
The country is dying like an ancient reptile
With a new virus in its cells.

[Chorus 2]

Hey! Strip naked!
Go out into the streets
And I will suppress my jealousy
If that is needed in this case.
Strip naked! Hey!
Be offensively sober,
For they like the drunken and mad
Who call for empathy.
Their thoughts will invade your body.
Undress!

[Outro, two times]

They like striptease,
They will get striptease.²⁹

The music has a hostile and militaristic vibe with a leading drum theme and an intense guitar section at the end. The verses are performed solo by the front man, while the choruses and outro are supported by the backing vocalist; the voice projects in each chorus and shifts slightly to the background in the verses. This creates the sense that the details in the verses are reserved for private conversation, while the message of the choruses and outro is directed at the public.

The woman³⁰ is encouraged by her partner to transgress the social control of the “butchers” by appearing undressed in public and violating the frame in which her naked body is meant to operate (private space). The transgression is to be performed in the name of the greater good for all and for starving children. In the given context, female sexuality remains contained within a hetero-normative culture: the woman is the one who takes action, yet her body is *allowed* to speak, to inhabit the public space in which the voice of her man cannot be heard. The lyrical hero sacrifices his male ego, suppressing jealousy to gain political power. He restores his agency by seizing control of the sexual fantasies of power-wielding “butchers.”

29 == Russian lyrics are available at <https://genius.com/>.

30 == Several adjectives in the original Russian lyrics indicate the female gender of the addressee, as Russian grammar requires adjectives that modify animate objects to be gender-specific.

The female body could be interpreted as a metaphor for the body of the nation, since the song calls on citizens to step out of private spaces—ones in which they are used to criticizing the government—and into the streets in order to save their country and, potentially, the world. The image of the “butchers” gives rise to several possible interpretations. One is that they refer to pathetic bureaucrats—on both sides of the Iron Curtain—who are concerned only with their own pleasure and with maintaining an order that does not disrupt their personal comfort. In the lyrical hero’s view, these degraded politicians have come to the point where they are neither taking action to save the country from the “virus” that is preparing to kill it, nor taking measures to protect people from the coming storm. People come to understand that they are the ones who will suffer the consequences, while the “butchers” observe death and suffering from a safely distant space.

= = = Loss and Longing

Kormiltsev’s disillusionment with late Soviet society comes through intensely in “*Ya hochu byt’ s toboy*” [“I Wanna Be with You”]. The song is usually regarded as one of the most iconic romantic compositions of the 1980s. It was also included in the aforementioned album *Knyaz’ Tishiny*, where it seemingly stood apart from the other tracks. The song is deeply romantic, with no explicitly political references or critiques of the social order; it portrays the lyrical hero in his attempt to break through the existing reality as he searches for something or someone dear to him.

Nau was both lauded and criticized for “I Wanna Be with You.” Part of their fanbase embraced the song for its emotional capacity and unique ability to articulate painful attachment to an object of love. The other part rejected it as overly romantic and melancholic—qualities often attributed to pop music or Soviet *èстрада*. Responding to a question from a reader of “*Ural’skiy sledopyt*” [Ural Pathfinder] in 1988, Butusov elaborated on the song’s meaning:

Love is often understood as an attitude of one particular person to another—Vasya to Lyuba—but the concept is much broader; it encompasses not only a “human-human” connection, but others as well: “human-phenomenon,” “human-symbol,” and finally, “human-life.” I don’t know how it happened that in the mentioned song the center of gravity shifted to the theme of love in the narrow sense. Apparently, “love” is a wretched theme in modern *èстрада* if people perceive our [song] only in a straightforward manner. Or, perhaps not everything worked out for us, although the task was broader: an attempt through love and emotions to express a general attitude toward life. Vague? Well, it means that I can’t speak clearly about love.³¹

³¹ = = “Otvety V. Butusova i I. Kormiltseva na pis'ma chitateley” [Responses by V. Butusov and I. Kormiltsev to readers’ letters], *Uralskiy sledopyt* [Ural Pathfinder], no. 12 (1988), <https://naunaunau.narod.ru/articles/0161-ural-sledopyt-1988/>

This comment invites a more careful analysis, beginning with the lyrics:

[Verse 1]

I was trying to move forward from love,
I was taking a sharp razor and wounding myself.
I was hiding in the basement, I was cutting
Leather belts that strapped down a weak chest.

[Chorus 1]

I want to be with you,
I want to be with you,
I want to be with you so much,
I want to be with you
And I'll be with you.

[pre-Verse]

I'm in a room with the white ceiling,
With the right for hope.
I'm in a room with the view of lights,
With faith in love.

[Verse 2]

Your name became different long ago,
Eyes lost their color forever.
A drunken doctor told me you weren't anymore,
A fireman gave me a paper
That your home burned down.

[Chorus 2]

But I want to be with you,
I want to be with you,
I want to be with you so much,
I want to be with you
And I'll be with you.

[Pre-Verse]

I'm in a room with the white ceiling,
With the right for hope.
I'm in a room with the view of lights,
With faith in love.

[Verse 3]

I was breaking glass as if it was chocolate in my hand,
I was cutting those fingers, for they couldn't touch you.
I was staring in those faces and couldn't forgive them
That they didn't have you but could live.

[Chorus 2]

[Pre-Verse, 2 times]³²

Verse 1 portrays the lyrical hero exploring pain in his attempt to break away from love. Chorus 1 reveals his desire to remain in a relationship with the object of his love. The Pre-Verse describes the present physical space of the lyrical hero and his state of mind within it. Verse 2 presents the antagonism between the inner world of the lyrical hero and the other world in which he exists and socializes. Chorus 2 exacerbates this antagonism through its insistence on reconciling desire with reality. In the Pre-Verse that follows, the tension wanes, only to be replaced by the strongest wave of disagreement with reality, which is expressed in Verse 3 and Chorus 2, and which, in turn, diminishes by the end of the song through the repetition of the Pre-Verse. The verbs in the verses are in the past tense, while those in the choruses and pre-verses are in the present tense, thus constituting a past/present binary and a distinction between acts observed in retrospect and the inertia of the present. The latter may be caused by the lack of empathy and support from the social environment: people simply live their lives, and the presence or absence of the object of love does not change their course in the way that it changed that of the lyrical hero.

The structure of the lyrics is enhanced by the spatial aspects of its delivery. Prefacing the story, a saxophone solo opens the scene and is supported in the background by the keyboard, guitar, and drums, which set the rhythm of the song. It is then replaced by the breathy, nearly whispering voice of Butusov, singing in higher octaves, stretching his words, and thus creating an impression of an intimate space shared by the performer and listener. The music helps center the voice, emphasizing its masculine character but also creating a sense of dismay. The sound of the bass drum is audibly diminished by drum plates, while the keyboard projects with the lower octaves. The leading keyboard theme in the pre-verse transitions to a radical change in sound at the beginning of Verse 2, disrupting the intimate ambiance. The voice gets stronger, at times nearly breaking into screams as it attempts to outdo the music, which stops shadowing the voice and gives way to a wider scope of instruments: a more extensive range of drums and string instruments, a bass guitar, and a stronger keyboard. The Pre-Verse following Chorus 2 reduces the tension and briefly returns the spotlight back to the solo saxophone. Verse 3 and the

³² = = The original Russian lyrics are available at <https://genius.com/>.

reiteration of Chorus 2 play out with the same tension as Verse 2 and the preceding Chorus 2. In the concluding repetition of the pre-verse, the voice joins the saxophone for the first time, metaphorically uniting the object of love and the lyrical hero, which until this point have existed in separate realms of reality.

The concept of enclosed space—the “basement” and “room with the white ceiling”—was not new to Nautilus. Examining the band’s preceding album, *Razluka* (1986), Selezova notes that in the opening song, “*Eta muzyka budet vechnoy*” [“This Music Will Be Eternal”], the lyrical hero is presented alone in the enclosed space of a room with a radio on a table; the music coming from the radio, however, expands the space and provides a sense of connectedness to the outside world, which the lyrical hero recreates through his senses and imagination.³³ In this same manner, the “room with the view on lights” in “I Wanna Be with You” offers a sense of connectedness to the world lost during the search for the object of love. The lyrical hero is consumed by pain and frustration, but still burns with hope and faith. Nonetheless, the change in the given circumstances seems unattainable despite all his attempts.

The song was commonly assumed to be about love to a woman and suicidal ideations. In her textual analysis of the lyrics, Isaeva assumes that the object of love or the “addressee” of “I Wanna Be with You” is a woman who has died, and that Verse 1 communicates suicidal attempts inspired by the narrator’s desire to reconcile with her. She acknowledges that the text contains no explicit mention of death, but she claims that it occurs allegorically in Verse 2. While conflict between the lyrical hero and a feminine addressee or social environment is common in Nautilus’ songs, Isaeva suggests that in this case the separation from the woman leads to the loss of self; the state of being “without you” is the equivalent to the absence of freedom, and, for this reason, the lyrical hero aims to destroy the metaphorical ties binding his weak chest.³⁴

Like some other of Nautilus’ compositions, „I Wanna Be with You” contains explicitly sexual and violent innuendos. The lyrical hero is searching for an outlet for his unconsummated desire and emotional pain, transgressing sexual norms through acts associated with sado-masochism and self-harm that involve a “sharp razor,” “leather belts that [are] strapped down a weak chest,” “hiding in the basement,” and “breaking glass as if it was chocolate in a hand.” The object of love does not, in fact, have a shape in the lyrics: neither its gender nor any features that could define its physical nature are specified in the text. Does she/he/it exist at all? On the one hand, the lyrical hero is embodied in the experience of physical pain. On the other, the personification of the object of love appears fleetingly in the words of a drunken doctor, and in the lyrical hero’s reflections on the change in the name and

33 == Selezova, “Albom *Razluka*,” 158.

34 == E. V. Isaeva, ““Ya hochu byt’...”: apologiya smerti? apologiya lyubvi? v tekste gruppy ‘Nautilus-Pompilius’,” *Russkaya rock-poeziya: text i kontekst* 12 (2011): 163-165.

eyes that have “lost their color forever.” The physical space that was once occupied by the object of his love is now merely reduced to a piece of paper offered him by a fireman.

“I Wanna Be with You” showcases Nau’s ability to evoke emotional depth through cognitive modeling. As Levitin suggests, schemata—patterns of understanding derived from sensory and emotional experiences—frame how audiences interpret art. In this song, the interplay of past and present tense, the shifting dynamics of the vocal performance, and the spatial imagery of the “room with the white ceiling” create a layered narrative of longing and loss. By mapping personal grief onto broader societal disillusionment, the song resonates with listeners navigating both private heartbreak and collective despair.

It is also entirely plausible to interpret the song as a sociopolitical commentary, in which the object of love represents the never-attained utopian ideal of a communist state. Despite the fact that the Soviets were actively engaged in the construction of communism, arguably such grand ideas lost their potency at the moment when love could be purchased with a pair of jeans. The lyrical hero as idealist is mourning this irreplaceable loss, while the majority of his fellow citizens have not even noticed what has disappeared from their lives. Some, like the drunken doctor (educated, intellectual), remember that it once existed but is no more, and some, like the fireman, can point to where it existed on paper (in multiple books on Marxist-Leninist theory). The lyrical hero, however, is the one who is lost without it. He feels bound to these utopian ideas, and though the bonds are painful, any freedom without them is unimaginable. The lyrical hero resists the world that is indifferent to the loss. He is shocked by those who do not share his feelings, but hope remains that one day he might reconnect with the world outside his room with the white ceiling.

A similar motif, centered on a profound sense of loss, appears in the song “*Letuchaya mysh*” [“Bat”] from the album *Chuzhaya Zemlya* (1992). Here, the lyrical hero mourns the departure of a female mythical creature (“witch or angel,” “light or darkness”) who took his soul away like a “shining stone in powerless claws” and whose absence has left him spiritually desolate. Desperate and unable to bear life without her, the lyrical hero pleads for the creature to return before his life spirals into madness (“if you don’t come back, I’ll find out how madness takes over”). However, the song’s stark lines warn that the window of opportunity to restore order is fleeting:

If you are late even for a moment,
The glass shatters like ice, and on the floor falls
A grey man, and the stone in claws
Becomes grey lead, and you fall powerless,
Crashing your wings, near the dead face.³⁵

35 = = The original Russian lyrics are available at <https://genius.com/>.

Both, “I Wanna Be with You” and “Bat” focus on an elusive object of love or ideal that shapes the lyrical hero’s existential struggles. In “I Wanna Be with You” the hero’s yearning is laced with self-destructive imagery—razors, leather belts, and broken glass—underscoring his profound frustration with a reality devoid of connection or meaning. Similarly, “Bat” employs metaphors of flight, claws, and shattered glass to convey a sense of irreparable loss and the fragility of hope.

Whereas “I Wanna Be with You” situates the hero within a physical space of isolation—a “room with a white ceiling”—that offers glimpses of light and hope, “Bat” projects the hero’s anguish outward, into the mythic and cosmic realm. All the same, the songs share an overarching tension between despair and resilience, revealing the complex interplay of personal and societal struggles.

In much the same way as the previously discussed songs, “Bat’s” lyrics lend themselves to political interpretation. Its vivid imagery captures not only personal grief, but also conveys a deeper, social lamentation over the disintegration of an ideal or the irrevocable loss of something transcendent. The departure of the mythical creature can be interpreted as the loss of the utopian ideals that underpinned Soviet society: the promise of communism that remained unfulfilled despite decades of effort. Her role as both a nurturing and destructive force encapsulates the contradictions of Soviet socialism: an ideology that inspired hope yet faltered under its own contradictions and excesses. The image of shattered glass and “grey lead” signals the irreversible descent into despair, both personal and collective, should the mythical creature not return. The fleeting window for redemption or transformation resonates with the broader sociopolitical atmosphere of the late Soviet Union, in which the possibility of meaningful change appeared both tantalizing and fleeting.

As evident from the analyses of the songs offered here, Kormiltsev’s critique often aimed less at the ideology of socialism and more at the flawed ways it was implemented in the late Soviet Union. Yet, he also showed no particular affection for capitalism. His ambivalence toward the impact of a market economy on social relations gradually evolved into open resentment, a sentiment that became increasingly evident in Nau’s repertoire of the 1990s.

= = Reflections on a Socialist Anti-Utopia

Throughout its existence, Nautilus captured and reflected the collective sentiments of the final generation of Soviets. Emerging organically from the masses and developing within state-controlled spaces, the band’s messages were inevitably shaped by its environment. Its dual focus on intimate and social concerns offers a foundation for understanding the band’s enduring legacy. Nautilus Pompilius was a cultural phenomenon that encapsulated the hopes, frustrations, and contradictions of a generation living through perestroika. Its music resonated with audiences on multiple levels, provoking thought, evoking emotion, and offering solace to those disillusioned with the erosion of socialist ideology.

Unlike the other bands of the 1980s, Nautilus rejected the Soviet aversion to physical pleasure and embraced the Western politicization of sexuality. In Nau's repertoire, pleasure and suffering come across as both deeply personal and profoundly political experiences, with emotions leveraged to advance broader societal critiques. Nevertheless, the band's perspective on gender roles and behaviors adhered to a conservative framework—one rooted in heteronormative patriarchy, in which men attempted to retain control over the female body. That adherence underscores the complexities of its position: simultaneously progressive and conservative, rebellious yet grounded in familiar structures.

Ultimately, Nautilus Pompilius' legacy lies in its ability to hold a mirror to late Soviet socialism, exposing its cracks while exploring the human longing for freedom, intimacy, and meaning. As Kozitskaya notes, the band inverted classical cultural tropes and imagery to create what some perceive as an “anti-world.”³⁶ This article, however, argues that Nau did not construct an alternative realm but rather held a mirror to its time, revealing a socialist anti-utopia in which personal crises and political dysfunction were inseparably intertwined.

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³⁶ == E. A. Kozitskaya, „Retseptsiya tradicionnykh kul'turnykh mifov, 'Vechnykh obrazov' i syuzhetov v sovremennoy russkoy rok-poezii (na materiale tekstov gruppy 'Nautilus Pompilius')”, *Russkaya Rock-poeziya: Text i Kontekst* 3 (2000): 192.

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Keywords

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Gender and Sexuality, Nautilus Pompilius, Perestroika Culture, Socio-Political Protest, Soviet Rock