

*Soviet Hippies*

Directed by Terje Toomistu, 2017, 75 minutes, color. Distributed by Wide House.

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In the first part of Terje Toomistu's documentary, *Soviet Hippies*, a group of men and women from Estonia, Russia, and the Ukraine, most now in their 70s, introduce us to the major events, beliefs, and practices of the hippie subculture in the Soviet Union from the 1960s through the 1980s. Interviews are supplemented with music, drawings, experimental home movies, and animation produced by the interviewees and their friends, juxtaposed with archival footage of Young Pioneers pledging allegiance to the Communist Party, military parades, and a 1971 television documentary in which hippies, policemen, and even a barber ("they should be forced to have their hair cut!") are interviewed. In the second part we follow this group of old friends on a long road trip from Tallinn, Estonia to Moscow to join the annual hippie gathering there, and learn more about how their lives, and the subculture, has transformed in the post-Soviet era. The background music is mostly from bands of the era, and some of the informants' stories are illustrated with original animations which try, in the tradition of much hippie art, to reproduce what people see and hear when on hallucinogenic drugs with swirling patterns, vibrant colors, and distorted, absurd people, objects, and actions. This gives the film a more immersive sense of what hippie culture feels like from the inside than a standard documentary could.

Hippies have been surprisingly neglected by anthropologists, sociologists, and even cultural studies scholars. This may be because punk remains the model for subculture in these disciplines even now, 40 years after the publication of Dick Hegdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, and punk was explicitly a reaction to what was seen as the failure of the hippie movement to transform society. But hippie culture's reach is just as global as that of punk or hip-hop, which have been much more documented and analyzed. And, as this film indicates, a re-evaluation of hippie ideology and practice, and the reasons for their persistence, is now more relevant than ever.

*Soviet Hippies* should be of interest to anthropologists, particularly if they are

interested in the globalization and localization of aesthetics, media and surveillance, and the perennial questions of how ordinary people deal with oppressive state power and the subversive (or not) potential of popular culture. Many of the interviewees were drawn into the hippie subculture through the music, which they found via short-wave radio, tuning in to the Voice of America or European broadcasts. As one group of men explain, they didn't understand any of the words, but they were captivated, physically moved, by the new sounds and rhythms. Scholars usually focus on the semiotic aspect of subcultural artifacts. What is interesting here is that the emphasis hippie culture places on physical sensation was clearly one of the major appeals of the subculture for Soviet youth, and this was also something that made hippies suspicious in the eyes of the state. It may seem strange, post-punk, to hear the Beatles described as radical and dangerous, but the British Invasion bands caused alarm in England and the US in the 1960s, and the way that the effect of any cultural expression is dependent on context is something the film's contrast between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras makes clear.

Scholars also often focus on how popular culture products (such as music) are re-interpreted and transformed as they cross borders. But at a time when any outside elements were seen as a threat to the state, the forbidden foreignness of North American and Western European hippie culture were also clearly an important draw, and hippies in the USSR seem to have worked hard to maintain the exoticism of their subculture. Indeed, one of the most striking things about Soviet hippie culture revealed in this film is how familiar it appears. The long hair and bandanas, the motorcycles, the home movies of couples dancing through meadows, the self-absorbed and irregular dance styles, the adoption and mixing of Buddhist, Daoist, and Hindu symbols and practices -- all will be easily recognized by anyone who remembers the hippie culture of the US and Europe in the Vietnam War era. One can easily hear, in the music of the Soviet bands, the influences of the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and Jethro Tull, as one can see the influence of Peter Max in their animation. English phrases ("Make love, not war!" "Flower Power!") are interspersed in the Russian in interviews. From what we are shown in this film, the difference between the hippie subcultures of the Soviet Union and the United States seems to come more from what was not adopted (for instance, reggae, dashikis, and other influences from the African diaspora) than from what was. The way that Soviet hippies value and maintain the foreignness of hippie music, language, and fashion poses some interesting questions for the idea that American soft power is necessarily linked to the values of the free market.

One of the most interesting aspects of Soviet hippie culture for me lay not in its content, but in its bricolage technologies. Amidst all the discussion of the potentials

and perils of the internet, we are reminded that a network spanning a continent can be built under the radar of surveillance, using only word of mouth and hand-written notes.

This film would make an excellent accompaniment to the work of anarchist anthropologists like James Scott and David Graeber, whose work has focused either on contemporary, explicitly political movements such as Occupy Wall Street or on small indigenous groups far from metropolitan centers. The older generation of Soviet hippies were united in their pacifism, but quickly crushed by the state. The younger generation of post-Soviet hippies are predictably more divided in their attitudes towards nationalist wars and more pessimistic regarding the possibility of making a better world. The director frames her main questions this way: “Is freedom an outward-looking social quality achieved via means of protest and active engagement? Or is it rather an inward-looking journey, an escapist lonerism, a spiritual path?” These questions, as many ethnographies and academic debates over pop culture, counter culture, and social movements demonstrate, urgent if not finally answerable.

In order to explore the question of the political possibilities of hippie subculture in both Soviet and post-Soviet society, however, we would need to know a bit more about the world that hippies there actually create. While the film does show us many aspects of older hippies’ lives, both joyful and tragic, we don’t really get a sense of how they get by – do they, and did they, have jobs? What kind? Do they rely on each other in their old age the same way they did in their youth? What were hippies’ relationships with other subcultures like? American hippie culture’s relationship with Asian, African American, and Native American cultures has been seen in terms of both appropriation and solidarity. How do Eastern European hippies interact with minority cultures there, especially the Roma? One thing that might let us understand hippie sociality better, is attention to gender. The relegation of women to the roles of sexually generous “chick” or “Earth Mother” is one aspect of Western hippie culture that has been strongly criticized since the 1970s. We get some indication from the interviews that these gender roles may have been adopted by Soviet hippies along with other parts of the subculture, but the film only provides us with the briefest clips of the voices of hippie women. It may be that gender and sexual identities have changed between generations. These would be interesting topics for further discussions and perhaps other films.

Regardless of what it leaves out, *Soviet Hippies* does manage to present some of the diversity and conflicts within the hippie community. And despite the current marginalization of that community, *Soviet Hippies* presents a timely reminder of just how radical, creative, and far-reaching it was and is.