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The *leybl* as *tusovka*: approaching hip-hop musical collectives in Bishkek

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Abstract

As in other peripheral music economies, hip-hop music-makers in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, self-organise their artistic labour in a context of "lack" of institutions and public support. This article takes a closer look at Bishkek's hip-hop *leybly*, musical collectives that emerged around 2010. In order to highlight the particularities of these social formations and analyse their inner workings, I use the concept of *tusovka*, a slang term widely used in everyday Russian-speaking cultural communities. Building on previous conceptualisations of this term as a form of meeting-based, organic sociality, and drawing on two examples of hip-hop *leybly* in Bishkek I argue that the *tusovka* can make a theoretical contribution to the wider field of popular music studies in an attempt at "ex-centric" theory building.

KEYWORDS: musical collective, hip-hop, Central Asia, creative labour

Introduction

"This is not Jay-Z, this is CeeTee! (…) This is not Rock-a-Fella, this is Xtazy!" claims rapper CeeTee (sometimes spelled CiTy) in the opening lines of the song "Xtazy" (CeeTee 2021). Re-licensed and re-released in 2021, the song originally appeared as the closing track on the autumn 2009 sampler *Nazad v budushchee* ("Back to the Future") (1) by the musical collective Xtazy Music, which CeeTee co-founded in the same year. In the absence of institutionalised music editing and distribution, such releases were made available for free via file-sharing platforms and promoted via community websites and internet forums. Although the download links to the album have long been inactive, the track list can still be found in a promotional post on the Kazakhstani forum vse.kz. In this post, CeeTee introduced his collective

as "independent record *leybl* that represents the interests" of its artists (CiTythaMVP 2009b).

"Xtazy" is a braggadocio song about the musical prowess of the members of the eponymous collective ("We make sure you're blown away / Our tracks are in the playlists for sure"). The comparison with US rapper Jay-Z's former record label Rock-a-Fella is part of this boasting, playing on the apparent contrast between a musical collective in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and one of the major players in New York hip-hop in the 1990s and early 2000s (Charnas 2010: 568–573).

In Bishkek, Xtazy Music was part of a wider trend, namely the proliferation of so-called hip-hop *leybly* (the plural of *leybl*, henceforth without italics), musical collectives revolving around recording studios. While this Anglicism borrows from the vocabulary of the globalised music industries, the difference between the leybl Xtazy Music and the label Rock-a-Fella-Records is more than a matter of scale. Both Jay-Z and CeeTee founded collective entities dedicated to the production of hip-hop music, but whereas one stands for artists' conquest of the "executive suite" (Negus 1999) of a pre-existing music business, the other is a self-organised group of music-makers in a musical periphery – a margin within the already marginal (to paraphrase Cuomo 2022: 38) post-Soviet space.

In an ethnographic study of Russo-Swedish musical collaborations, Tolstad (2021) describes structural differences in the organisation of music production, which Russian music-makers express in terms of "not having a music industry". This resonates with observations of a "postcolonial discourse of lack" (Eisenberg 2022: 52) in relation to music production in various African contexts (MBaye 2011; Navarro 2018; Perullo 2011). The *topos* of backwardness is also widespread among music-makers and critics in Kyrgyzstan (see, for example, the long forum thread initiated by a user named Drunky dron [2009]). However, defining social practices in terms of what they are *not* (structured, professional, and so on) is hardly analytically satisfactory.

Categories and concepts coined in relation to the music industry paradigm in Western Europe and North America do not seem appropriate tools either. In his study of rock music in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, Cushman (1995:13) called to "capture the lived experiences and biographies of popular musicians in their own words". As Alacovska and Gill (2019: 208, original emphasis) rightly argue, the necessary decentralisation of creative labour studies requires one to "consistently *engage with* and *think through* concepts developed 'elsewhere' and […] written in local languages."

With this imperative in mind, a special issue on "contemporary post-Soviet popular music" is a welcome forum to consider what conceptual contribution music practitioners from the different life-worlds that fall under this heading can make to popular music studies. With regard to questions of collective music production and the particularities of Bishkek's music leybly, I use the emic notion of *tusovka* (plural *tusovki*, henceforth without italics) as an analytical tool. Building on previous conceptualisations, I argue that this Russian term is a useful tool to analyse the organisation of creative labour in Russophone settings, and perhaps beyond. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bishkek between 2019 and 2021 for an ongoing doctoral dissertation on the production of the city's hip-hop

music, including in-depth biographical interviews with music practitioners, media reports, and archival data (such as relevant internet forum posts). (2)

Conceptualising musical collectives

The formation of collective social forms around and through musical practices has been an important concern in music studies. The rise of popular music studies was accompanied by the proposal of alternatives to the established sociological notion of "community", which was seen as inadequate to capture the changes associated with cultural globalisation (cf. Shelemay 2011: 356–364). Among these notions, the "scene" (Straw 1991, 2015) has been the most successful, and is also found in English-language press articles on hip-hop in Bishkek (Trilling and Schenkkan 2012). In research on post-Soviet popular music, the scene has been used "to denote the nexus between global musical trends and local cultural sensitivities, identities, and place-based policies" (Poliakov et al. 2020: 403), translating a concern with identity formation often associated with the notion. As critics have pointed out, the great success of this concept has come at the expense of analytical precision (cf. Hesmondhalgh 2005; Krims 2009). Moreover, unlike the "scene" in everyday English language, the Russian *stsena* (and the Kyrgyz *sakhna*) is not used in everyday language as a signifier of cultural community.

Most importantly for our concern with leybly, the scene – even when delimited as "local" or "lived" scene (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 8; Guibert 2012) – still considers a wider level of analysis than that of musical collectives and collective units of creative labour. The same can be said of the framework of the "art world", a productive notion to highlight the collective underpinnings of artistic production. Revolving around shared conventions and "patterns of collective activity" (Becker 1982: 1), it encompasses a much broader social scale than that of collectives.

The leybl as a collective unit of musical production is at the intersection of notions of community and collective entrepreneurship. Emin and Guibert (2017: 90–100) frame local music scenes in provincial France as a "cluster", an "entrepreneurial system" composed of collectives often formalised as associations. In an attempt to analyse the "collective dimension of musical activity, and how it relates to its economic dimension" Costantini (2020: 43) uses the notion of the "musicalized network", inspired by Tassin's work on music groups in France (2005: 94–98). This notion allows one to focus on concrete social interactions in the organisation of musical practices as well as the importance of trust and exchange. Farrell's (2001) notion of "collaborative circles", located at a similar level of analysis, refers to collectives that produce creative innovation. He places a particular emphasis on the formation and evolution of such circles and their production of social roles.

Ethnographic work among different musical communities has brought to light a whole range of notions used by practitioners to refer to their musical collectives. The specificities of these collectives are linked to their particular genre, forms of activity and location within wider musical worlds. To begin with, scholars of jazz in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s described the social institution of the "clique" as collectives of friends who shared musical aspirations and exchanged favours to further each other's careers (Becker 1963: 99–116; Stebbins 1968).

Looking at electronic music in Britain, Charles (2019) described collectives involved in organising dance music events as “crews”.

Studies of hip-hop production have not only been at the forefront of de-Westernising academic language (Alacovska & Gill 2019: 201) but are also particularly suited to analysing collective creative labour. Jouvenet (2006: 105) notes rappers’ “obsession with the collective”, an expression of their “belonging to ‘authentic’ networks”. De Paor-Evans (2020: 237) uses the term “crew” in his ethnography of hip-hop in rural Britain, defined in a glossary entry as “group of *headz*, also known as a posse, clique or troop”. Forman (2012: 253) highlights the “posse” as “fundamental social unit binding a rap act and its production crew together, creating a collective identity that is rooted in place and within which the creative process unfolds.” Mbaye (2011: 132) describes the function of “a ‘family’, a posse, a crew” as supporting a particular hip-hop artist “by taking a variety of ‘official’ jobs”, pointing at its role in the organisation of creative labour.

Hip-hop practitioners in Bishkek are active recipients of their genre-typical vocabulary and adopt a number of different English-sounding names for their musical collectives: for example, the rap collectives AP Clan or Allipsis Clan (following the worldwide success of the Wu Tang Clan), Tengri Squad, ChP Family, or the breakdance collective Up Center Crew. A hip-hop collective would not call itself a tusovka, but the term is regularly used as an umbrella term in conversations *about* collectives of these kinds.

The tusovka

To take just one example, this is how Mansur of the rap group Kiggaz described the state of hip-hop in Bishkek in the 1990s: “Back then, rap was not a mass phenomenon. There were small tusovki. There were people who organised local performances here in the city, and all that tusovka would come there and rap” (Mansur 2019). The double use of tusovka illustrates the term’s semantic ambiguity, a signifier both of social events (“small tusovki”) and the people who attend them (“all that tusovka”). These two meanings can be summarised in Russian as follows: “Any event, meeting of people united by common political, professional, etc. interests, affairs (*dela*)” and “Characterising a circle of people united by common interests, a common cause (*delo*)” (Butseva and Levashova 2014: 1140–1141).

Like many Russian slang words, tusovka has its roots in the vocabulary of the criminal world. Grachev and Mokienko (2008: 242–246) trace its origins to terms that appeared in the 1920s such as *tasovat’* (“to shuffle [cards]”), along with the reflexive *tasovat’sya* (“gathering [for a meeting of criminals]”) and other derivatives such as *potasovka* (“scuffle”). The root “tas-“ comes from the French verb *tasser* (“to tamp”). After a vowel shift from a to u, it entered the vocabulary of Soviet hippies in the 1970s as *tusovat’sya*/tusovka and from there it spread to other “informal” youth movements in the 1980s. It further became a highly fashionable word; both the Russian-language corpus of Google Books NGram Viewer and the Russian National Corpus show a sharp increase of its use after 1985. (3)

It’s worth noting here that Russian has been the dominant language in Bishkek even after independence, playing the role of a collective identifier of the “urban” (as opposed to “rural”) population at least until the 2010s (Schröder 2017: 163–

167). Although there is no language corpus for Kyrgyzstan, the mass use of the term tusovka there can be inferred from its appearance in the mass media (for example, the youth section of the high-circulation daily *Vechernii Bishkek* was called "Tusovka VB" in 1996 and 1997) and its ubiquity in my own fieldwork, with more than 250 occurrences in interviews and media material.

While the tusovka emerged as an alternative to "official" notions of collectivity in the late Soviet Union (Cushman 1995: 168), its proliferation accompanied the social and cultural changes of the glasnost and perestroika reforms initiated in 1986. The extensive use of the term by young cultural – especially musical – communities didn't fail to attract the attention of cultural critics and scholars (Cushman 1995: 167–169; Pilkington 1994: 171–177; Troitsky 1990; Yurchak 2006: 146–148; Zdravomyslova & Voronkov 2002). For them, the tusovka pointed to a particular form of sociality – understood here as particularly affect-laden social interaction (see Filimonov 2021: 62) – that developed in "informal" cultural communities. According to this understanding, the period after 1991 marked the end of this phenomenon (Cushman 1995: 263; Pilkington 1996).

However, not only did the term survive the Soviet Union, but its popularity continued to grow. The art historian and curator Viktor Misiano (2005) proposed a conceptualisation of the tusovka as "a form of the artistic milieu's self-organization, in a situation where other institutions and state protectionism are altogether lacking". Drawing on his own experience as a key figure in the field of contemporary art in Moscow, he used this notion to make sense of the peculiarities of the art economy that developed in the 1990s (Schellens 2021, 214–218). More recently, the tusovka has been used as a social concept in studies of alternative Russian political life (Želnina and Lange 2013), of queer spaces (Stella 2015: 111–131) and independent media (Filimonov 2021:120–129).

In all cases, the notion points at forms of sociality constituted through repeated encounters at regular events or places. Its essential feature is its organic emergence from the direct, often face-to-face, interaction of its members. Pilkington (1994:173–175) describes tusovka participation as a form of "embodied communication" (rendered in Russian as *obshchenie*; see Yurchak 2006: 148–151), based on "physical communication" and rooted "in the individual *and* the collective body." According to Misiano (2005), the tusovka reproduces itself through meetings "attended for the sake of meeting". Here the semantic complexity of the word comes to the fore: "In order to be in the tusovka, one just has to be there. Be in the right place at the right time – at the place where tusovka comes about" (ibid.). As it takes shape through the recurring interaction of a group of regulars, the tusovka expresses "the sense of collectivity" that participants "feel as a result of their common activity" (Cushman 1995: 167).

At the same time, the tusovka suggests a degree of "informality". It thrives at a distance from formalised social institutions, commercial leisure and major cultural production infrastructures. Stella contrasts the queer *scene* in Moscow, structured around a range of commercial and public spaces and resources, with the more informally organised queer tusovka in the provincial city of Ul'yanovsk (Stella 2015: 113–116). In relatively volatile, unstructured social contexts, the tusovka asserts itself as a particularly accessible and flexible form of collective organisation, fulfilling a function of stabilising social interactions reminiscent of what Simone (2004: 407–411) calls "people as infrastructures".

In Bishkek, the first hip-hop collectives emerged from such a crystallisation of groups of regulars. As in Mansur's remark above, tusovka is one of the most common terms used by practitioners to qualify collectives of hip-hop enthusiasts who met in public squares, at dedicated, self-organised "rap parties" and – from 2000 onwards – at hip-hop festivals. These tusovki initially formed around different "elements" of hip-hop, such as rapping, break-dancing and graffiti. It was not until the 2000s that more narrowly specialised hip-hop *music* tusovki developed.

As rapper M Syava explains, these changes correlated with the varying sizes of gatherings. As larger hip-hop festivals went out of fashion towards the end of the "first wave" of hip-hop (see the following section), the hip-hop tusovki shrank:

> We disunited (*raz"edinilis'*). Somehow these big festivals, they united everyone. Nobody was separate there. There was mainstream rap, hardcore, and more. […] And after 2006, 2007, somehow it was more… divided and some started doing their own little tusovki and festivals. We had our tusovka as well, a permanent one with 4–5 teams performing and our circle of interested people (M Syava 2020).

As Pilkington (1994: 173–174) noted, some tusovki define a degree of exclusivity after their formation phase in order to protect the "safe environment" they provide for their members. Such divisions within Bishkek's broader hip-hop tusovka began as early as the mid-1990s when a section of the regulars at hip-hop meetings adopted the name "Cross Road Clan". The symbolic act of naming fixed social identity and defined an "inside" and an "outside". In the early 2000s, the world of Bishkek hip-hop was animated by the rivalry between different tusovki, most famously between "Vendetta", which brought together some of the most popular rappers, media personalities and beatmakers of the time, and a tusovka centred around the rap stars of Akapella. As Mansur (a member of Vendetta) explains:

> Among those who were in Vendetta, we were more or less on good terms personally as well. And they [Akapella] had their own tusovka with whom they were in contact. […] They didn't have a name, but they had their own tusovka: there was Akapella, 312, MC Mara (Mansur 2019).

In everyday language, the tusovka can refer both to a broader community of interests that shares certain meeting places, and to narrower collectives of practitioners that emerge from such a community. Both meanings can be found in its conceptualisations, with the scope given to the term depending on the relative weight one decides to attribute to each of its two core principles: common interests and sociality. *Broader* tusovki include people in a given place who share a common area of interest or a cultural practice and who *potentially* know each other from attending the same kinds of gatherings. This kind of tusovka, often denoted by an adjective delimiting the sphere of interest (such as hip-hop tusovka) is an "ideal" (Cushman 1995: 168), a projected community. For example, the media tusovka discussed by Filimonov (2021: 122) refers to a pool of people who do not participate in independent media production but who regularly socialise with those who do. In his words, the term expresses the latter's "fantasmatic logic of

community building". Such tusovki resemble a form of localised "scenes" (Filimonov 2021: 124; Stella 2015: 114).

The second form of tusovka, on which I concentrate in this article, is often marked by possessives (see M Syava's and Mansur's remarks above) or by reference to a collective, expressing a higher degree of sociality among its members. The frequent use of the reflexive *svoya* tusovka is significant in this regard: beyond their common interests, members of such *narrower* collectives form a group of "trusted" people, of what Yurchak (2006: 102–114) defines as *svoi* – those who prove to have a similar understanding of how certain social rituals should be performed. In Misiano's (2005) understanding, a tusovka is held together by "reliance", an organising principle that brings a degree of predictability to the life of the collective, which is otherwise devoid of formal rules. Members of a tusovka-collective can develop almost family-like relationships, including a set of implicit rights (to ask for help when needed) and obligations (to be available to help the tusovka when needed).

Functionally, such artistic tusovki become self-organised creative labour collectives based on personal, "face-to-face" sociality and a fluid distribution of labour roles (Schellens 2021: 216–217). Analytically antagonistic to the vertical structures of a corporation (Misiano et al. 2002), they share certain characteristics with other forms of "organic" collectives, such as artist-run rap labels and "musicalized networks" (Costantini 2020: 43; Jouvenet 2006: 150). Unlike them, however, they do not thrive on "dissent" (Shelemay 2011: 373–370), on opposition to existing corporate structures (such as major labels), but grow in their effective absence.

Bringing together people who fulfil different roles necessary for artistic production (in our case, these include the roles of rappers, beatmakers, sound engineers, media personalities, graphic designers, and so on), this social formation remains deeply individualistic and resists institutionalisation – the definition of explicit hierarchies, social constraints, and roles. Rather, it develops "personalized surrogates" (Misiano 2005) of institutions, "imitat[ing] the institutional reproduction of artistic life via a system of group relations" (Misiano 2010). In the case of Bishkek's hip-hop music, the leybl as a tusovka-form of the record label is a case in point.

Hip-hop leybly in Bishkek

Having established the tusovka as an analytical concept to consider the world of contemporary art in Russian metropolises in the 1990s, the authors of the Moscow Art Magazine noted how this social form was eventually sidelined by the corporatisation of the sector, a consequence of political consolidation in Russia since the early 2000s (Misiano et al. 2002; Misiano 2010). In Kyrgyzstan, however, there has been little political and economic consolidation. Against the background of three unplanned political changes at the highest level (the "revolutions" of 2005, 2010 and 2020), and given a relatively small local cultural market (with six to seven million inhabitants and a high level of poverty), no corporate institutions have developed in the field of music production, nor does the state play a relevant role

for music practitioners, who regularly complain about a lack of support from public administrations.

Nonetheless, after its beginnings as a form of cultural "underground" in the 1990s, hip-hop music in Bishkek began to reach local and regional mass audiences in the early 2000s (Coppenrath 2021: 4–5, 2022: 1304), largely thanks to radio play and the private reproduction of music on cassette players, Bluetooth and – somewhat later – the Internet. This first "wave" (2000–2007), when Bishkek rap was extremely popular among local youth, was characterised by festivals and concerts (the main source of income for musicians) and a collusive relationship with "informal" cultural entrepreneurs (Tatchim 2021) or *prodyusery* (Tolstad 2021: 69–70). In order to record their tracks in sufficient quality to be played on the radio, and thus aspire to mass popularity, hip-hop musicians used the services of the professional recording studios that were then in operation – mostly run by artists and sound engineers with little knowledge of the genre.

The emergence of specialised recording spaces was the result of technological change, namely the increasing availability of computers and digital audio workstations (mostly unlicensed copies) such as Hip-Hop eJay or Fruity Loops / FL Studio. Those music-makers who could also afford (and find) the necessary hardware – a high-end microphone and studio monitors, among others – could claim ownership of their own means of musical production by opening home studios and sometimes earn additional income by recording other artists, as Spinetti (2005: 197) noted in neighbouring Tajikistan. In other cases, hip-hop practitioners have "privatised" public infrastructure: the collective "Vendetta", for example, used a recording studio on the premises of one of Bishkek's technical universities.

A turning point came with the advent of "commercial" hip-hop studios, which opened their doors for the public to record for a (reasonable) fee and openly advertised their services. Staffed by self-taught sound engineers specialising in the genre, they were able to produce satisfactory results at a lower cost than many other studios. Black Studio, which opened around 2007 in a basement near the central Ala-Too square, is often cited as the first such studio, and inspired many others to follow: Connection Pro (2008–2012), Click Clock (2010–2013), Space Sound/Meikindik (2011–present), to name just a few. In early 2011, the "recording studios" page of the music website showbiz.kg showed a non-exhaustive list of eight such recording studios in Bishkek. (4)

Hip-hop studios were more than just recording spaces. They attracted musicians and their entourages and became a social hub for all kinds of regulars. That's how sound engineer Dok Dail describes the atmosphere there in the early 2010s:

> What was it like in the studios back then? A studio would open and 500 people would go in and out every day, and there'd always be some kind of chaos (*kasha*), some kind of bustle (*kipish*). Someone is eating sunflower seeds, someone is getting drunk or swearing loudly, and it was always like that in the studios, especially in the rap studios (Dok Dail 2019).

Whether established by individual "hip-hop entrepreneurs" (Mbaye 2011: 91–95) or by pre-existing collectives, these studios were fertile ground for the crystallisation of groups of regulars into tusovki. Mimicking the institutions of the music industries, collectives of studio regulars called themselves leybly.

Membership was contingent on repeated attendance, but not only that. It could also require the demonstration of satisfactory musical skills (as perceived by the collective's gatekeepers). The modalities of participation in a leybl varied: some defined almost contractual conditions, such as a monthly membership fee, in exchange for which one could record a certain number of songs; other studios allowed members to record for a flat rate or even for free. In return, these musicians "represented" their collective: the aural tags of various leybly can still be heard at the beginning of many rap songs from the period. Leybl participation, like certain social rituals meant to assert "professionalism" (the signing of contracts for example), retained a high degree of performative dimension (Yurchak 2006: 21–26).

Membership also entailed participation in joint musical projects such as the release of compilation albums, long mixes, or music videos. Some leybly were active in organising public events. For example, between February and September 2009, three editions of the hip-hop festival *Za RAPutatsiyu* ("For RAPutation") were jointly organised by the collectives of some of the most prominent hip-hop studios – Connection Pro and Black Studio (KochevNik 2009). Leybl activity in Bishkek was also closely linked to the mass popularity of rap battles, a feature of Russophone rap music in these years (Tsarev 2019). After the fashion for battle rap reached Bishkek via specialised Russian forums such as hip-hop.ru, some leybly organised their own online battles, mobilising sponsors to provide prizes. As participants had to submit professionally recorded tracks, these tournaments stimulated work and competition between recording studios.

At the same time, leybly did not develop formal hierarchies and an explicit division of labour. This led to a number of misunderstandings and personal conflicts, and in turn to a high volatility. Rapper Kaibar, of the Kyrgyzophone duo Aga-Ini (the founders Space Sound, later called Meikindik, the Kyrgyz word for space), recalls the seemingly endless number of studios that have opened and closed during his decade-long career:

> […] what happens there? Rappers get together, form a collective, open a studio and then close it after a while. The first problem is that many of them do not know their role. Some come just to hang out (*potusit'*), others come to work, and at some point they can no longer pay the rent. That's the main problem, the rent. Then the studio closes (Kaibar 2019).

Opening and operating a studio is a costly undertaking, often borne by a collective effort of leybl participants. In fact, the most common reason for the closure of studios and leybly, apart from personal conflicts and *forces majeures* (such as fire emergencies or problems with law enforcement), are problems with covering running costs, especially the rent for the studio space. The flexibility that helped leybly spread became a weakness when it came to working on a long-term basis. In Kaibar's words: "The problem is that people can't work as a team. […] Overall… a lot of people are talented in rapping, hip-hop and dancing, but as a team they can't work together and so they don't exist for long" (ibid.).

Hip-hop leybly reached a peak of activity in the first half of the 2010s, a time of prominent battle rap and local community websites and internet forums. But the resonance of their work remained largely confined to circles of fellow hip-hop

practitioners: the mass appeal of Kyrgyz rap had been eclipsed by other genres, and the internet platforms used to distribute music were mostly local or regional at best. Before the introduction of 3G (from 2011) and flat-rate internet tariffs that included access to foreign domains, using local internet platforms and social media was much cheaper than connecting to the *worldwide* web (Melvin & Umaraliev 2011). "Global" platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and the like were only gradually appropriated by Bishkek's hip-hop practitioners in the 2010s.

Because of these technological constraints, but also because they were "shackled" by their organisational nature as tusovki (Misiano 2005), the resonance of hip-hop leybly remained limited to the local (or regional) scale. While hip-hop collectives continued to form (and still do), self-identification as leybly declined, sometimes replaced by alternative characterisations such as "creative unions" (*tvorcheskii soyuz*). At the same time, high-end music production has become even more accessible, reducing the need to come together in multifunctional collectives. In recent years, there has been an increasing individualisation of production, while structural changes in the local music economy in the wake of the streaming revolution favour a degree of corporatisation (cf. Coppenrath 2021).

The leybl as a tusovka

In this section, I will take a closer look at two hip-hop leybly in Bishkek: Xtazy Music (later called Headliners), which I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this article, and PARS Records. Both were particularly active during their lifetimes, producing a lot of music and supporting events, but they eventually disappeared after several years of activity. I show how looking at these collectives through the notion of tusovka helps to make sense of their emergence, internal functioning, activities and eventual dissolution.

Although both leybly were formalised with the creation of their respective recording studios, they were initially born out of preexisting social networks based on meetings. This is particularly true of PARS Records, founded in 2008 as an amalgamation of various rap groups that met at rap parties organised by rapper Black-D at the Tequilla Blues club. Black D was a key figure and "gatekeeper" (Farrell 2001: 84–85) in local "underground" rap and had recorded many of these groups in his home studio BJ Rec. As Lyoma of the group LeeMitT recalls, these regular interactions foreshadowed the formation of a leybl*:*

> There we all started to be in touch (*obshchat'sya*). And after that, the tusovki [in Tequilla] stopped. Since we were hanging out together (*obshchalis'*), we decided… I'll tell you the truth, Zamay, Strike was… the engine, so to speak. He pushed us to do a studio. We organised PARS Records (Lyoma 2021).

Xtazy Music was founded by rapper CeeTee, who had several hits in the mid-2000s with the group Asian Bloodz, and rapper Rasheed (of AP Clan). They brought together a selection of rappers and beatmakers from their respective circles of acquaintances. The members of the collective had all started making music a few years earlier and knew each other from hip-hop events or online forums. As one member of the group Oakland recalled in a radio interview: "Actually with CeeTee,

we had wanted to record something together for a long time. Then we met through Diesel [Online Forum]. […] [We did] our first feat[uring], after which we had plans to open a studio" (Bishkekradio.kg 2014). CeeTee started renting a utility room to have a "base" to meet and produce music. The grouping was initially called Supreme ENT, but quickly changed its name to Xtazy Music to avoid confusion with the French rap group Suprême NTM.

PARS Records set up its studio in a rented workshop in the building of the Frunze factory, a Soviet-era industrial zone near the centre of Bishkek, where some of its members worked as furniture makers. The members pooled their available resources:

> My father had bought [a microphone] like that [on a business trip to China], it turned out he had anticipated well. And in the workshop we had an office room with a computer. We put the sound card in there. Strike brought a four-channel mixer. With all the guys we put money together and bought a computer, more or less a good computer for music and all that (Lyoma 2021).

While both Xtazy Music and PARS Records came together as reconfigurations of earlier hip-hop tusovki, the availability of a recording studio as regular meeting place played an important role in their subsequent lives as tusovki of their own. As Pilkington notes (1994: 172–173):

> In the quicksand of the urban environment, the *tusovka* roots a certain set of people to a defined space, at least for a short time. […] [I]t is the outwardly visible result of a process of getting and being together.

In addition, the organisation of public events allowed them to connect with a broader tusovka. Between April and June 2009, PARS Records organised at least four happenings called *Razblokirovka* ("Unlocking"). While the stage there was mostly reserved for leybl members, *Razblokirovka* was conceived as an extension of their sociality. As the rapper Slon of the group *Vostochnyy Kvartal* ("Eastern Quarter") noted:

> Razblokirovka is a musical community (*kom'yuniti*), simply put a tusovka, people who make interesting music […] and want to share it with others. […] At our parties (*tusovkakh*) there are teams and solo performers, mostly those who collaborate with the new music leybl 'PARS Records' (Vostochnyy Kvartal 2009).

To effectively generate tusovka, events must have a serial character (Misiano 2005). Xtazy Music, however, remained "limited to one tusa" (short form of tusovka, here meaning "event"; Bishkekradio.kg 2014) and the collective was temporarily disbanded after the public presentation of their joint album *Nazad v budushchee* in late 2009 failed to generate a satisfactory response.

In any case, it took more than participation in serial events to join these leybly. Rapper Nion, the only music maker to join PARS Records after its inception, had first contacted Lyoma through an online forum and asked him to review a beat he had made. The conversation led to Nion recording one of his raps in the studio,

followed by a process of repeated collaboration that gradually led him to the tusovka:

> And when we were organising concerts with PARS, I said, let's call him too. And we also wanted to take Nion into our studio. Yes, Nion wrote a few more tracks. It started to go well and we started to invite him. And then he was also part of our studio, as it turned out (Lyoma 2021).

Held together by tusovka sociality, both leybly functioned as a self-organised unit of artistic production drawing on their wider networks. To be sure, such a networked, site-bound musical unit is not atypical of the organisation of hip-hop production in general; for example, Negus (1999: 497–499) discusses the issues raised by such collectives as the genre began to deal with major labels. Nor is the fact that the leybl is the basis for the realisation of musical projects, "units of collective action, a temporal frame for a convergence of acts of labour" (Jouvenet 2006: 232): recording an album, filming a music video, organising a public event, and so on.

PARS Records was arguably the most prolific rap leybl in Bishkek in 2009, releasing five of the eighteen rap albums/mixtapes listed in a thread on the online forum "Diesel". This earned them the respect of CeeTee, who jokingly remarked that they would "soon reach the level of [US label] Cash Money in terms of releases per year" (CiTythaMVP 2009a). In early 2010, they released the collective album All PARS, the cover of which lists the "acts of labour" that went into it: who wrote (produced) which beat, where the songs were recorded, who mixed them and who created the visuals (Pars rec 2010).

When Xtazy Music reformed in 2010 with a slightly different line-up under the name Headliner, it became, according to EDM artist DJ XTZ (aka Jaya; he had then adopted the collective's initial name), "probably the first mini leybl with a serious approach" in Kyrgyzstan (Jaya 2020). Thanks to CeeTee's connections in the United States, Headliner pioneered the release of music via music streaming platforms as early as 2012 (Coppenrath 2021: 5–6). It produced the soundtracks for director Ruslan Akun's popular comedies *Bishkek, ya lyublyu tebya!* ("Bishkek, I love you"; 2011) and *Salam, N'yu York* ("Hello, New York"; 2013) and released impactful albums by rap groups A.P. and Oakland, DJ XTZ (for a contemporary review, see Omuraliev 2014) and the popular Kyrgyzophone female singer Kanykey.

At first glance, therefore, these leybly do not seem so different from music labels. The difference is, on the one hand, contextual, because in the absence of mechanisms to monetise music, in the face of ubiquitous "piracy" (Biasioli 2021) and the effective "legal invisibility" (Mbaye 2011: 219–226) of their sector, these social formations have no way of stabilising themselves as firms, nor as associations in an entrepreneurial system, like the music amateurs described by Emin and Guibert (2017). Their functioning as tusovki is a way of dealing with this problem, "effectively creating" artistic infrastructures through a system of generalised imitation (Misiano 2010) and resorting to "creative practices" (Perullo 2011: xii) to sustain their activity. In April 2010, for example, PARS Records announced a campaign to "recruit" new clients and members willing to use the recording studio for a fee (Ascanor 2010).

Ultimately, leybly as tusovki rely entirely on the individual initiative of their members. They are not led by directors, but by a charismatic leader who is able to "draw the members into discipline-related activities" (Farrell 2001: 85–86). In our two examples, it seems that the rappers CeeTee and Strike were most often recognised as fulfilling this role, almost by default: "I was already working less as an artist and more as a producer. Not because I really wanted to, but because there was nobody else who could do it" (CeeTee 2020). While leybly managed to realise a number of projects, in the absence of a system of material benefits and constraints, they could not develop "*a* common project" that would subordinate its participants to a common cause, a characteristic of the tusovka according to Misiano (2005). In fact, statements about their goals rarely go beyond abstract, commonplace notions such as "raising the level of rap in our country".

As they remained dependent on individual commitment and characterised by a fluid division of labour, both PARS Records and Xtazy Music/Headliners were highly fragile social entities. In the absence of pre-established work processes, holding the collective together, managing disagreements, disputes and the sometimes family-like feelings of obligation required a high degree of – unevenly distributed – relational labour (Alacovska 2018). Ultimately, both disintegrated in relation to the departure of their leaders, combined with an external shock that challenged the *status quo*. In the case of PARS Records, an increase in the rent of the premises and a demand for some form of expense allowance on behalf of Lyoma (who had taken on the role of sound engineer) led to a dispute among the members:

> Well the fight (*srach*) started. And nobody wanted to pay the money, as far as I understand. So what did we decide? Some people from our tusovka, they left right away because of that (Lyoma 2021).

The collective had also lost its "engine" when Strike emigrated to Russia in 2010 – where he pursued his prolific rap career as Zamay (Red'kin 2017). Headliners disbanded around 2014 due to the loss of their studio space and the departure of CeeTee: "Basically, it happened spontaneously. Well, then I already took another job, and parallel to that… it turned out that we had to leave the place where we were" (CeeTee 2020). Both leybly turned out to be dependent on the personal investment of a few, and the corresponding tusovki faded away as soon as they were deprived of their regular meeting basis. Some of their members eventually emigrated, others changed careers and a few pursued musical careers on the side, in association with various other tusovki – most notably the group A.P., which remains active to this day.

Conclusion

Looking back, CeeTee questions the corporate analogy he rapped about in the "Xtazy" track mentioned at the beginning of this article:

> [Xtazy Music/Headliners] wasn't even an official company... there was just a name and that was it. Well I had a private tax number that we could formalise something with and so on. But that was like… I can just say that there was no money in that sphere, so I think that's why it all fell apart. (CeeTee 2020).

In this article, I have used the notion of tusovka as a tool to capture the specificities of social formations such as the leybly that animated the world of Bishkek hip-hop music at the turn of the 2010s. A meeting-driven, organic collective emerging from the regular social interaction of its participants and held together by mutual reliance, the tusovka proved quite successful in organising musical projects and providing a temporary framework for collective action. However, none of Bishkek's hip-hop leybly has been transformed into a structure that transcends its participants. In the absence of effective copyright regulations, there was simply no basis for such structures: leybly produced music albums and even sold some of them on physical media (mostly CDs, which were quite cheap to produce), but the music was mostly distributed for free via file-sharing platforms.

The use of the term tusovka by hip-hop music-makers in Bishkek tends to be associated with the *topos* of lack – collectives are often described as "*just* a tusovka", not enough to be a proper "professional" structure. In this sense, a leybl is not a record company, but the result of music-makers' adaptation to the wider music economy in which they operate. On the other hand, it does not do justice to the sincere efforts of music-makers to portray leybly and tusovki as nothing more than premature developmental stages on the way to a "proper" music business. PARS Records, Headliners and the like played a key role in the development of music production in Bishkek and were important career steps for their members. Understanding them as a very specific form of collective organisation, the tusovka, allows us to characterise them in positive terms, rather than according to a teleological understanding of music economies as "naturally" moving towards the model of Western music industries.

Studies of hip-hop in various "peripheral" contexts have highlighted such localised efforts to organise situated music economies (see Aterianus-Owanga et al. 2020). De-centring our understanding of popular music making means resisting the idea that there is a Western "norm" in relation to which we should understand music making in other places. Rather, as Qu, Hesmondhalgh and Xiao (Qu et al. 2023: 14) argue in their article on music streaming in China, "each geo-regional system has its own peculiar and distinctive paths". Analysing such paths may require its own concepts – such as tusovka as a form of organising creative labour in the specific economic and social conditions that emerged in Russophone worlds after perestroika.

Endnotes

(1) All translations are mine. For the transliteration of Cyrillic, I use the BGN/PCGN romanisation system, except for words that are used in English (for example, perestroika and not *perestroyka*).

(2) This article builds on and complements an analysis of the collective character of hip-hop music making in Bishkek, which will be the subject of the third chapter of this dissertation, which is expected to be completed in early 2025.

(3) See the results of a search for "tusovka", written in Cyrillic letters, for the period 1970–2019, on the Russian National Corpus (https://ruscorpora.ru/en/explore?req=тусовка) and the Google Books NGram Viewer

(https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=тусовка&year_start=1970&year_end=2019&corpus=ru-2019&smoothing=0). Both accessed: 24 January 2024.

(4) The web-portal showbiz.kg, which was managed by members of the leybl Connection Pro, is not active anymore. A cached copy of its "recording studios" section from 30 January 2011 can be consulted on the Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/20110130005617/http:/www.showbiz.kg:80/index.php?do=cat&category=studzvuk. Accessed: 24 January 2024.

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