Jamala, the Dakh Daughters, and Ukraine’s New Femininity

By Natalia Antonova

It can be strange, being a woman from Ukraine. We are considered beautiful, but in a cheap, too-obvious way; we are women fit for aging sex tourists and big-fish-in-a-small-pond expats. We do not choose, we are chosen. Misogynists use us as foils for Western women who will not give them the time of day—in the sense that we are supposed to weigh less and be more deferential (read: we are supposed to humor the asshole at the bar, as opposed to tell him he is an asshole).

Most importantly, we are not supposed to think too much. Ukrainian women, in spite of an intellectual tradition that spans everyone from the poet Lesya Ukrainka to playwright Natalia Vorozhbit (who is a good friend), are not associated with high art, philosophy, or political criticism or all the other things we are considered too dumb and explicitly feminine for.

Of course, all I have done above is list a bunch of stereotypes. The average Ukrainian woman will confidently tell you that she is stupid. But stereotypes have power, especially when you are young and impressionable and have not seen much of the world. That is why pop culture is important: if it offers a breadth of examples that enable young women to see a variety of interesting choices opening up in front of them.

From Ani Lorak to Vera Brezhneva, famous Ukrainian pop singers have traditionally been cast in a very particular mold. They are beautiful, crackling with a particular kind of sexual energy, but also ‘safe’, and just bland enough. In Ukraine, they are often compared to well-compensated service industry employees—here to please. They are not going to do anything to kill your boner or put unusual ideas about politics or society in your head. They do not take risks with their image like Lady Gaga or show righteous anger like Beyoncé.

One Ukrainian music producer told me just a few years ago, “Ukraine could never have its own Beyoncé—she’s too political. And forget about an alternative Ukrainian act with major crossover appeal if it’s a woman—international audiences expect Ukrainian singers to be pretty, not ‘different’.”

It seems that the Ukraine crisis may have proved him wrong on both counts…..

Like with Jamala and pop, the Ukraine crisis has also brought a new dimension to gender within the world of Ukrainian alternative music, namely to all-female freak cabaret band known as the Dakh Daughters.
The Dakh Daughters began at Kiev’s independent theater Dakh, started by director Vlad Troitsky, the same place where I began my career as a playwright after a bad break up (because how else does one begin a career as a playwright?).

The art world in Kiev, my native city, is small, everyone knows everyone, or is related to everyone. I am related to one of the Dakh Daughters, Solomia Melnyk, my cousin. And I remember how the Dakh Daughters were starting out—they were a playful act, experimenting in the tiny Dakh theater when the women were not starring as actors in its productions.

The strange times we are living in overtook them and their work grew to be a sharp, darkly funny, lovingly poetic exploration of everything from the ongoing war to shitty relationships. Their sound is both unmistakable and hard to pin down—there is a bit of The Dresden Dolls, and a Greek chorus, some spoken word, and folk with a delicious, rockabilly edge.

The Dakh Daughters famously adopted “To moye more” (literally: “That’s my sea”), a Ukrainian pop rock song of the early 1990s, and turned it into a sly, and somehow incredibly fun criticism of the Crimean annexation. One of their other famous compositions, “Rozy / Donbass” is a lyrical mixture of everything from a Shakespeare sonnet (“No more be grieved at that which thou hast done: Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud”) to a Ukrainian folk song featuring a woman going mushroom picking.

“Rozy / Donbass” gained special significance when armed conflict broke out in Ukraine’s Donbas region, though the song was written before the guns started firing—and when you listen to the track, with its heavy beats and building sense of foreboding, you cannot help but wonder if these women somehow saw the future.

Much like Jamala, the Dakh Daughters are characterized by a sense of removal. Nothing about their lyrics or performance style is on the nose. Each performance contains several layers: Drama is covered up with laughter, laughter descends into the grotesque, anger is subverted into farce. And judging by how enthusiastically all of this is received and how quickly the tickets sell out, it seems that Ukrainian audiences are more than ready for female artists who will challenge them.

Their fans often wonder if the Dakh Daughters are different when the paper-white, dramatic stage makeup comes off—they are not. I hate the expression “they live their art,” but, well, they live their art, and are as likely to engineer an episode of vaudevillian hilarity in a grocery store as they are on the stage.

As Russian critic Marina Davydova noted earlier this year, it was at the Dakh Daughters’ triumphant performance at Wiener Festwochen in Vienna that “a real and unconditional victory was won for Ukrainian musical culture.” For Davydova, that ranked much higher than Jamala’s Eurovision win, seeing as Eurovision culture is generally disposable.

I, however, see both Jamala and the Dakh Daughters as two important aspects of a newly popular femininity in Ukraine, shaped by conflict and crisis, but also by not having anything to prove. This is a femininity that does not place one’s fuckability at the center of one’s work. It does not reject sex appeal, it just refuses to grant it special privileges, or set the average man up as its ultimate arbiter. It does not establish an unattainable ideal for the audience to follow, it invites the audience to participate in the drama, in the fun. It sinks its pearly white teeth into politics, then spits it out, and turns it into something unexpectedly beautiful in the process.

The upheavals of the last few years have ensured that Ukraine will never be the same, for many reasons, a great number of them unbearable in their sadness, terrifying in their banality. But there has also been courage and resistance, there have been hopes and beginnings. It is fitting, then, that the best songs of these times are not sung by caged birds.

http://www.wdw.nl/en/review/desk/jamala_the_dakh_daughters_and_ukraine_s_new_femininity
Rock the barricades: the Ukrainian musicians soundtracking the unrest

How have Ukrainian musicians responded to their country's unrest? Some sang at the barricades in Kiev's Maidan square, while others stayed silent

Peter Culshaw
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Dakh Daughters perform at Maidan square in Kiev. Photograph: Volodymyr Shuvayev

"We are the fascists you have been warned about," says Nastasia Pustova, sitting in the Paravoz bar in Kiev. The people in Paravoz are not the members of the minority Svoboda party, with their swastika-lite logo, who have become the poster children of the Ukrainian conflict for the Russian media, keen to push the idea of the country's post-revolution government as neo-Nazis, or a "fascist junta". Instead, those sitting in this chic bar – where one wall shows a projection that makes it look as though you are riding a train – are young, hip music types – among them Sophie Villy, an up-and-coming Ukrainian singer-songwriter, fresh from appearing at SXSW in Texas – who have been forced to take sides by events in their country.

"We are at war," says Oleh Skrypka, one of Ukraine's biggest rock and folk stars. His band Vopli Vidoplyasova – who started out as an edgy ska-punk outfit, but have moved into exploring psychedelia and Ukrainian folk – played in Hyde Park during the London Olympics. He explains that Ukraine – which, for hundreds of years, has been subject to invasion and rule by neighbouring countries – has a deep love of freedom. "My role is as a singer," he says, "but if the Russians come, I will take up arms. Everyone will." Given his career as a purveyor of arty, intelligent pop, it's a little like hearing Jarvis Cocker say he will be investing in a Kalashnikov. In fact, Skrypka was born in Tajikistan and spent his youth in Murmansk in the north of Russia before studying in Kiev. But he, like several others I meet in Kiev, says he has adopted a new nationality: "I made an existential decision to become Ukrainian." (In fact, one of the spurs for the revolution was a posting by an Afghan-born but Kiev-based journalist, Mustafa Nayem, who called on Ukrainians to gather to protest at the government's decision to delay on agreeing closer ties with the EU.)

When the government of President Victor Yanukovych was deposed, there was an initial wave of euphoria, which swiftly dissipated as Russian separatists made their presence felt, as Crimea was lost, as lives were lost. But among the original heroes of the Maidan Revolution – named after the EuroMaidan – literally Euro Square – in central Kiev, which was the
focus for the protests – were **Dakh Daughters**. They were in among the revolutionaries, singing at the barricades and on hastily erected stages, singing to massed ranks of military and police, and a delirious crowd.

Those who were there remember a chaotic atmosphere of creativity at Maidan, with performance art pieces acting almost as mirrors to the police. There were people dressed as superheroes (Darth Vader just ran for Mayor of Kiev), a motley crew of democrats, idealists and, yes, nationalists. There were dispossessed people involved, but Tanya Harylyuk of **Dakh Daughters** says she was struck by the sight of a well-heeled woman wearing an expensive fur coat driving up in a Porsche and throwing tyres from her boot on to the barricades.

**Dakh Daughters** are less Spice Girls, says their "artistic director" Vlad Trotsky, "more Pussy Riot – with good music". They are genuinely original – mixing classical minimalism with passionate Ukrainian folk and a touch of "freak cabaret", delivered with punk energy. As far as lyrics go, they also have an original approach: essentially sampling words from the most inspiring and relevant places they know. One of their "hits" (they have yet to release a record) is a version of Shakespeare's Sonnet 35, reworked as **The Rose of Donbass** (where armed separatists barred people from voting in the national elections last Sunday). Other songs steal lyrics from everyone from beat poet Charles Bukowski to notable Ukrainian writers such as **Taras Shevchenko**.

**Dakh Daughters**' pianist Harylyuk admits to being among those making Molotov cocktails when the snipers started firing in to the crowd at the EuroMaidan in February ("although I didn't actually throw any"). She also helped feed the revolutionaries, organise volunteers and sang not just with the group but as her solo project **Tanya T**. The issue of how involved musicians should be in Ukraine's uprising became a vexed one, and the decisions the artists made had differing consequences for them. Some artists saw their popularity increase by backing the revolution, such as the rock star Slavik Vakarchuk, whose band **Ocean Elzy** were early supporters of the Maidan protests. The hip-hop band **TNMK** played a lot of shows in support of the protesters, while other musicians involved themselves more directly: **Boombox**'s frontman Andriy Hlyvnyuk acted as a medic and driver. "I didn't feel like playing," says jazz pianist Ilya Yeresko, of the salsa band **Los Dislocados** (the Dislocated). He gave up music for the duration to help out, because "I discovered for the first time there was something more important than music."

Some contributed musically – and again non-Ukrainians helped lead the charge, with two Belarus artists recording songs that became "hits" of the revolution. The rapper Vozhyk ("hedgehog") recorded a deeply sarcastic tune from the point of view of a Russian explaining the need to save Ukraine from the Ukrainians, for fear they would all become gay if they moved closer to the EU, while the band Lyapis Trubetskoy released the more conventionally stirring **Warriors of Light**.

Others, though, stayed away. Skrypka says Vopli Vidoplyasova didn't play at the Maidan because "I could see there would be violence and didn't want to encourage fans to come and be responsible for possible deaths." His critics reply that he either lacked the nerve or was hedging his bets on who would win. The brilliant young classical composer **Alexei Shmurak** didn't play because "I didn't want to become an internet meme", although he does say the energy of crowds here and at the Orange Revolution in 2004 "made me realise I was not alone. It shook me out of a depression." What is unnerving for him is that his projects with Russians have been cancelled, because as a supporter of the revolution he was accused of being a fascist. "I even know Russian parents who have disowned their son who lives in Kiev for supporting a Nazi regime," he says.

Some of these musical idealists believe the best way to counter the accusation that Ukraine is a country of fascists is to construct a believable democratic narrative for the new Kiev. "We may have an army on the border, fighting in the east,
and the economy may be about to collapse," Vlad Troitsky admits, but he believes Kiev can be a cultural centre offering something better than "the tired, old culture of Europe" or Russia, which is trying to run the clock back to the glory days of empire. Already Kiev is seeing an influx of oppressed artists, musicians and intellectuals from Russia, and Troitsky thinks that trend will continue. Kiev could be the new Berlin.

Certainly, the events in Ukraine mean art in the country actually stands for something. In Kiev, there are several exhibitions fizzing with work that takes on social and political subjects with imagination and humour: Georg Schöllhammer, the curator of the next Kiev Biennale, entitled the School of Kiev, talks of "art with meaning" as opposed to the western art world, which, he says, is "mainly about money".

I spend one morning walking through the Maidan with Kiev's brilliant musical export Dakha Brakha, the "ethno-chaos" band who will play in the UK at the Womad festival in July. The barricades are still up in the square, made of bins, sandbags, shoes, street signs and piles of tyres. As the journalist Peter Pomeranzev puts it: "It almost looks as if the fabric of the city had risen up and rebelled … Rubbish has become a symbol of resistance and sacrifice."

Dakha Brakha's music has a Talking Heads-ish intelligence about it, a mixing of richly soulful Ukrainian singing and modern, global arrangements that include African rhythms and slyly funky basslines. I see them perform a newly composed soundtrack to a version of the 1930 film Earth by the Ukrainian director Alexander Dovzhenko. "It's relevant today because of what is promised and what actually happened," the band say, before picking up the theme of the other musicians I have spoken to – that this is a feminine land, out of which a new country can be born.

Dakha Brakha didn't play as much at the Maidan as Dakh Daughters and some of the other bands, partly because of their higher international profile. "We were travelling a lot as representatives of Maidan abroad," says Marko Halenevych of the group. He was also nervous about how their distinctly Ukrainian songs might be misinterpreted. "Our music is a kind of soul music and not nationalistic, although very often Ukrainian folk music is interpreted that way," he says. "We never wanted people to raise their patriotism so they would act aggressively."

And through it all, life – and music – goes on. One night I go to an illegal club playing industrial techno, where the biggest danger isn't caused by the likelihood of political violence, but from the fact the place stinks of petrol, everyone is smoking, and there's only one exit. At 4am I was invited to an apartment party, we sped eastwards – where several journalists have been kidnapped – for 30 or 40 minutes with people I had never met and a brief flash of paranoia took hold. But it was good to see the edge of the city. Twenty floors up in one of those Soviet brutalist blocks, some film and music students were sitting around discussing Godard and Dakha Brakha. What happened on the Maidan was "a non-reversible event", said one. It had unleashed all kinds of energies and sent a creative, electric jolt through the city. "We will be all right, you think?" someone asked me on the balcony, as the huge tankers rolled on the road below and the sun came up, with mists rising on the fertile, green Ukrainian countryside in the distance.

• This article was amended on 27 May 2014 to correct the attribution of a quote in the opening paragraph.

https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/29/rock-barricades-ukrainian-musicians-soundtracking-unrest
Dakh Daughters sing for patriotism, love of Ukraine

By Daryna Shevchenko
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The freak cabaret Dakh Daughters band performs in Kyiv during their concert on Sept. 19, several months before the EuroMaidan Revolution in Ukraine started. The band was active during the protests in Kyiv that toppled Viktor Yanukovych as president on Feb. 22. During the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, the Dakh Daughters see themselves as peacemakers as they tour Russia. Photo by UNIAN

“I know that might sound too heroic, but that’s how it feels now,” says Ruslana Hazipova, one of seven Dakh Daughters members. The band was formed two years ago after a performance of Kyiv Dakh Theater, when seven Dakh actresses simply thought they “sounded good together.” The band defines their style as “freak cabaret.”

Band members say they still do not have a single studio recording and ensure their music is much better live. But after only two dozen concerts, many of them at Maidan, the band’s fan number in the thousands.

“Their folk motives are not cliché, which is very rare. Besides that I believe their song Gannusya can actually unite east and west,” says Oksana Levkova, a Dakh Daughters fan and Kyiv civil activist. And even people in Russia seemed to feel band’s peacemaking prowess.
“In Russia people came to the concerts with huge bouquets of roses because of our famous song Donbass Roses,” Melnyk says, recalling a March show in Russia, adding that they felt absolutely no aggression. Still, the question of going to Russia or not was critical and very touchy, the women agree, especially after the Russian annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea on March 16.

“We almost lived at Maidan, we were there at all times, now we boycott Russian goods and then go to Moscow? It was a difficult decision,” Melnyk explains. “Our message there was – there is no war in our hearts.”

They don’t regret the decision, the performers say, just as they never regretted the band’s involvement in Maidan events. The band first played at EuroMaidan when there was no stage yet, on Nov. 28, near the Stella independence statue on Kyiv’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti. From then on, the musicians say their motto during the protests was “do what you can where you are with what you have.” All seven worked as volunteers at information centers, helping in the kitchen, bringing tires or medicine to the front lines and singing, of course. “Sometimes we were not sure whether this or that was the right moment to sing, sometimes could not decide on the repertoire, but we never thought we should not be there,” Melnyk says.

Dakh Daughters performed both on the big stage of EuroMaidan and on Hrushevskoho Street, Maidan’s January hotspot, to support protesters and even trying to entertain riot police. “No reaction though,” Melnyk smiles, but says playing for protesters went even better than planned. “We wanted just to sing a bit for self-defense fighters there, but people gathered and almost a real concert happened,” she recalls and smiles at the memory.

Just one of hundreds of beautiful, intimidating, scary, sad and inspiring memories Dakh Daughters got from four revolutionary months. Vitaliy Medvedev, one of the Maidan self-defense fighters says he heard Dakh Daughters at Maidan, but couldn’t come closer to see them. “Then I saw the video and they are amazing,” he says. “They are like witches in the process of some magical ritual, very cool.”
A classic Dakh Daughters performance includes a lot of theater, up to 15 musical instruments on stage and stage make-up, however the singers say they had to give up both elements due to the conditions on the Maidan. “We happen to sing a capella and without any costumes or even minimal preparations,” Melnyk says.

One of the band’s newest songs, Divoche Viche, was even written on one of the revolutionary days, and many have revolutionary videos. “Life at Maidan was so suppressed, full of events and emotions. It felt like we lived 44 years in four months,” says Natalka Galanevych, another member of Dakh Daughters.

Dakh Daughters say they are not disappointed with the revolution. “The main thing that changed – people started taking responsibility,” Galanevych says. All the members say that “despite all the mistakes that new authorities are making” Ukrainians should give them time and participate in changing the system themselves.

“We were sick for many years and we cannot get better in some 15 minutes,” Melnyk says, and the others nod. All seven are ready to do what they can to build a new country.

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Sometimes one weird band leads you to an even better, weirder band. That’s what happened this week when we started looking into a Ukrainian band called DakhaBrakha, who have a show in L.A. next week (with Tuvan throat singers Huun Huur Tu, no less). DakhaBrakha describe their music as “ethnic chaos,” which sounded pretty promising — but it turns out that, although they’re a perfectly good band with a cool NPR Tiny Desk concert to their credit, they’re not that weird. Unique? Absolutely. But our minds were not blown — until we stumbled across a another project their cellist, Nina Harenetska, is sometimes part of, called the Dakh Daughters Band. We’ve been binge-watching their videos ever since and we’re still picking pieces of our brains off the keyboard.

Dakh Daughters Band is the product of Dakh Contemporary Art Center, a theater in Kiev. It’s seven actresses who also happen to be fantastic singers and multi-instrumentalists. Each song they perform is a mini-cabaret
full of sung-spoken monologues, eerie Ukrainian folk harmonies, percussion, strings, stringed instruments turned into percussion, wailing, weeping, white face paint, moaning and gnashing of teeth. It’s like The Bacchae meets The Tiger Lillies meets Dead Can Dance, except even more awesome than that. Here’s their most famous video: https://youtu.be/6wCgZh-nczY

I mean, holy fucking shit, right? Just when you think, “OK, that one’s clearly the star of the troupe,” another one starts singing and steals the show. And then another. And another. They’re all amazing! How many kick-ass women are in the Ukraine?

As good as the “Rozy/Donbass” video is, clips of Dakh Daughters’ live performances are even more riveting. Prepare to witness the sexiest accordion-fueled murder ballad ever performed: https://youtu.be/a8UFJroJ4to

The Dakh Daughters started their self-described “freak cabaret” in 2012 as a one-night project for a performance in Paris. Apart from a bio on a website called What’s On Kyiv and a short Wikipedia page, very little has been written about them in English, so we don’t know much else about them, except that another of their members, Ruslana Khazipova, is in another Ukrainian band called Perkalaba, who play a sort of Ukrainian-gypsy version of ska-punk. And they’re playing Lyon, France in 2016. And we’re really fucking jealous of Lyon.

The Daughters’ latest music video is actually a cover of a Perkalaba song called “Zozulytsya.” In it, the girls seem to be trapped in some kind of cage in which they’re forced to play their instruments using household objects like wooden spoons and giant keys and whatnot. They’re also not wearing their trademark white facepaint, which I guess makes this their equivalent to KISS’ “Lick It Up,” only way less sucky. Give this one a few minutes; it builds. Oh, how it builds: https://youtu.be/dlGjgIk3ha4

https://weirdestbandintheworld.com/2015/09/17/dakh-daughters-band/