

Global Ear

In the Arctic Russian city of
Murmansk
the Inversia festival attempts to fuse technology and tradition. By **Nikita Velichko**

BJ Nilsen recording at Inversia festival in Murmansk



"North is super meditative. It's harsh, sometimes ruthless, but at the same time it calms me down. It's full of different forces, but to my regret even people who were born here don't always use them as opportunities." I'm talking to Oleg Khadartsev, the creative director of Fridaymilk agency responsible for the three day audiovisual Inversia festival, which often reflects on the remoteness of the North. This second edition of Inversia takes place in Murmansk, the world's largest city inside the Arctic Circle, a location that's at once mysterious and in some ways extreme.

Experiencing nine months of winter and 40 days of darkness, the polar night when the sun hides below the horizon, is normal for Murmansk, as is its opposite: the polar day of summer during which the sun never disappears. But Murmansk, unlike some other Russian provincial cities, is not a depressing place. I'm here for the second time, after spending the 26 hour trip from Saint Petersburg staring at the astonishingly beautiful, freshly snow covered nature of the Karelia region. In Murmansk I feel a positive sense of resilience in the air. The locals, including musicians and a saleswoman who clandestinely sells me vodka at a kiosk after the alcohol curfew, talk easily and with good humour, as if this attitude helps them survive the city's seasonal hardships. It should be noted that a lot of people can't speak English – then, the same can be said for rest of Russia.

Sound artist BJ Nilsen echoes my thoughts. "I'm Swedish but I think that people from the North have very much in common," he says. "For example, a great sense of humour. Jokes keep you warm." Currently based in the Netherlands, he led a field recording workshop during the festival. "A group of seven people [from Murmansk and other cities] were recording the same sounds, and all their pieces are different. That is interesting," he comments, as we talk at a party marking the last hours of the festival.

The night before Nilsen played a concert that included sounds he'd recorded the previous summer at the bridge across the Kola Bay and at the train station. It felt like a impressionistic trip over the Arctic which, apart from the Russian language

announcements, could just as easily have been recorded in another Nordic country or Greenland. But I wonder if all the people from the Northern hemisphere, as he says, really connect "on a different level".

Norwegian DJ and producer Charlotte Bendiks has been part of the growth of *Insomnia*, a festival held in Tromsø, also inside the Arctic Circle. "I've always felt very much alone, like an outsider," she says. "I don't feel connected to the North at all, besides my friends from Tromsø." I'm talking to her after the film screening of *Northern Disco Lights*, a documentary charting the growth of the musical scene in her hometown. She got inspired there, but then went to Germany and hung out with artists from South America. Back in Norway, she says, it was, and still is, mainly "the boys' and the straight scene's club". But there's no hint of coldness during her fast-paced DJ set, which fires up the club at 2am, accompanied by the sparkly multicoloured visuals of Moscow's VJ Haust.

Per Martinsen aka Mental Overdrive is a veteran of the Norwegian dance scene. "Without party we wouldn't survive," he declares. A festival highlight, his show is built on glitched, minimal, sparse beats and straightforward dance rhythms, which he breaks down with ambient glaciers. Adjusting the kind of music he makes according to season, he tends not to escape but to explore the theme of weather and polar areas. At an artist's talk he remarks on the concert of local musician Jasnazima, whose sound seems to him "individual and site-specific".

Jasnazima, aka Slava Redov, has artistically grown since I heard the naive electroacoustic set he performed with vocalist Cetacea at the same festival last year. His recently released album *Vanishing Serene And Still* combines powerful drone with gentle beats and melodies composed with field recordings and bass guitar loops. His music translates the feeling that Murmansk gives you: freezing and at the same time ardent. He understood what he should do with all his samples, he explains, after watching the documentary *Hot Sugar's Cold World*, where a musician travels to Paris to create music made

entirely from the sounds of his environment. "Another influence was arranging parties last winter and an evolving passion for techno scene," he adds. During his festival set he uses a bow, a bass guitar and some electronic equipment to make the audience feel as if it has been caught up in a heavy blizzard.

However, his set doesn't work for one drunk guy who loudly complains about coming to the club and having to pay 300 roubles (around £4) to hear "something like Malevich's *Black Square*". The most ambitious experimental music at the festival doesn't always resonate with the crowd; Inversia and its not very huge audience is very much an exception for Murmansk.

"I feel like the city's looking at us from the outside," admits Khadartsev. "I don't feel bad about it, but it's a curious feeling." Meanwhile, the organisers also try to attract people to the festival through visual art presentations. You can go see some virtual reality, documentaries, and other cinema screenings. Two opening free shows at Murmansk Philharmonic Hall, the clash of something exotic and at the same time conservative, get the best feedback. Khagaudzh have been invited here from the south of Russia – they use instruments like the shychevshyn and kamyk, as well as their voices, to perform ritual Adyghe folklore songs and the Nart epic. Meanwhile, the music of Wimpe & Rinne from Finland combines bass clarinet with electronics as they draw on the joik tradition.

A reason why Murmansk might never truly develop musically like Tromsø is the continuing exodus from the city. For socioeconomic reasons as much as its harsh climate, Murmansk's population has been falling year on year; young people choose to move to Moscow, Saint Petersburg or faraway countries. One group performing at the festival called Apes Vulgaris consists of members divided between Murmansk and Saint Petersburg. I ask Khadartsev his own reasons for staying in the city. "I don't want to move to Moscow not because it's good or bad," he responds simply. "It's just interesting to be here. But sometimes I ask myself if there will ever come a faith crisis in the development of the local scene." □ inversiafest.com