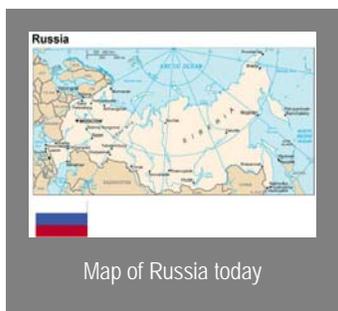


X-ray Film with Music Recording, c. 1957

Gift of Vladimir Toumanoff



When is an x-ray not an x-ray? When it substitutes for a vinyl record. This x-ray film, engraved with grooves to become a recording of an Elvis Presley song, "I've Got a Lot of Living to Do," c. 1955, symbolizes Soviet citizens' desire for free expression (and rock 'n roll music) during the cold War. The x-ray "record" shows how free speech surfaces ingeniously in oppressive societies.



During the 1950s, jazz and rock 'n roll music thrived in the United States but suffocated in Stalinist Soviet Union. Creative souls in the U.S.S.R. hungered for Western artistic expression of all kinds, which was "cool" next to what they saw as banal Socialist art.

To show the world that the repressive Stalinist era was over, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Joseph Stalin's successor, permitted rock 'n roll to enter the Soviet scene in a historic 1957 concert, even though no one there was sure if rock 'n roll was the name of a song or a music genre. Once the first rock chords twanged, young people threw themselves into the new sound with abandon, as the Soviet government struggled against this "distasteful" Western decadence to little avail.

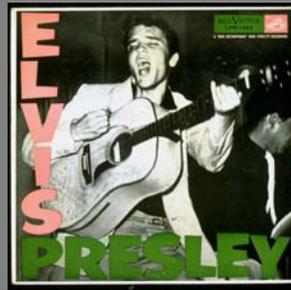
Records of the new music were not easy to come by in the 1950s U.S.S.R., so devotees often relied on ingenuity and secrecy to obtain their music. Some young people learned to duplicate records using a converted phonograph that "pressed" sound onto discarded x-ray film. An unknown enthusiast transformed this x-ray of human ribs into a recording of Elvis Presley singing "I've Got a Lot of Living to Do." Millions of duplications of Western songs were sold for one to one and a half rubles on the black market. Music-hungry young Russians were able to listen to the ephemeral music on these odd, flimsy discs with their static, cold images for several months until they wore out. Referring to the gray anatomy of the x-ray medium, they called the process "recording on the bones."

Foreign Service Officer and distinguished scholar Vladimir Toumanoff acquired this x-ray recording at the end of the 1950s while serving in the Soviet Union. Before donating it to the U.S. Diplomacy Center in 2000, he taped the scratchy Elvis Presley song "I've Got a Lot of Living to Do" onto an audiocassette to ensure the x-ray disc was genuine.

The connection between this x-ray record, rock 'n roll and diplomacy may at first seem tenuous, but all are related. American diplomats relied on jazz, rock and many other American art forms to reach out to people in the closed Soviet world and to communicate Western values, including human rights and freedom of expression.



Soviet youth c.1950s



Elvis Presley RCA
Album Cover, 1956
Library of Congress