TRANSLATION / 1989



MUSIC ON BONES

Gleb Arsanov

APOCALYPSE CULT

READING COPY AC-0138

MUSIC ON BONES

Gleb Arsanov, 1989

THE PLATES

People ask where we got the X-rays as if it were the difficult part. It was the easy part. A hospital takes thousands of pictures and keeps very few. The rest went out the back in sacks, to be burned or sold for the silver, and a porter with a family will sell you a sack for less than it costs to drink with him.

I got mine from a woman called Z. who worked in the basement of the district clinic. She did not know what I wanted them for and did not ask. Once she said, "You are not a doctor," and I said no, and she said, "Good, the doctors never pay."

A plate is big enough for one disc, sometimes two if the patient was a child. You draw the circle with a compass and a pencil and cut it out with dressmaker's scissors. The hole in the middle we burned with the end of a cigarette. Everybody did it that way. If you see a bone record with a neat hole, it was made later, by a collector, or by the police.

THE MACHINE

The lathe belonged to S., who had been a sound engineer for the radio before something happened that he did not discuss. It was a cutting machine of the kind used to make master discs, foreign, brought back at the end of the war by someone who thought it was a sewing machine. S. had rebuilt it twice. It lived in a wardrobe, and when it was working we hung blankets on the door, not for the noise, which was small, but because S. said that a closed wardrobe with blankets on it looked like grief and nobody would knock.

You put the original record on one turntable and the plate on the other, and the needle cut what it heard. A good night was forty copies. A bad night was when the film was too old and split, or when the tram went past and put a jump in every groove for the length of a street.

WHAT WE CUT

We cut what people asked for, and people asked for what they could not have. In the first years it was jazz and the dance bands from before the war. Then the tenors who had left the country and sang about leaving it, which old men bought and played very quietly. Then, from about 1957, the new American music, which the young ones called rock and which I did not understand and cut anyway.

Records came to us by the strangest roads. A sailor's suitcase. A diplomat's son. Once a single disc that had been carried, I was told, through four countries inside a loaf. I never knew whether that was true. It was a very ordinary song.

We sold them in doorways and in the toilets of the cinemas for a ruble or a ruble and a half, about the price of a dinner. Every copy was different, because every patient was different. A man would buy a foxtrot and find it was printed on somebody's spine. You could hold it up to the window and see the vertebrae go round.

THE SOUND

I will not pretend it was good. A bone record sounds like a party in the next flat. There is a hiss under everything, and in the middle of a trumpet solo you might hear the tram. After five or six plays the groove began to go, and by the tenth you were listening mainly to the memory of the song.

Nobody minded. That is the thing I would like people now to understand. We were not selling sound. We were selling the fact that the song existed and that somebody in this city had gone to some trouble to bring it to you. You put it on and it came through the bones of a stranger, and you were, for three minutes, not where you were.

A girl once brought one back and asked for her money. I thought it was the sound. She said no, the sound was fine, but the X-ray was of a hand, and she could see that the hand had been broken, and she could not dance to it.

HOW IT ENDED

It ended the usual way, with some of us arrested and the rest frightened. There were patrols of young volunteers whose job was to find us, and they were good at it, because they were the same age as our customers and went to the same doorways.

They also learned to sell records of their own. You bought what was supposed to be a famous song and put it on, and after a few bars of music a voice came on instead and told you what kind of person listens to this, and what would become of you. I have heard one. The voice was very calm. I think now that it was the most frightening record ever made in our country, and it was the only one made with the full support of the state.

S. was taken in 1959 and given three years. I was not taken, for reasons I have thought about since and do not like. The lathe went back in the wardrobe and stayed there. By the time S. came home, tape recorders could be had, and nobody wanted bones.

WHAT REMAINS

I kept a few. They are in a drawer with my father's medals and some letters. I do not play them; they would not survive it. Sometimes I take one out and

hold it to the light, and there is a chest, and the ghost of a heart, and a song I can no longer hear.

I have wondered who they were, the people whose bones we used. Mostly they were well, I hope. You do not take an X-ray of a dead man. Somebody had a cough, or a fall, and went home. They will never know that their ribs went round at seventy-eight turns a minute in other people's rooms, carrying a saxophone. If any of them read this, I would like them to know that it was done with care, and that it was the best use anyone ever found for the inside of a person.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Music on Bones
AUTHOR	Gleb Arsanov
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TRANSLATOR	Dagny Ulvestrand, 2026
SOURCE	Translated from a carbon copy of the typescript, the third or fourth in its sequence and faint in places. The author's name is given as he signed it. Place names are abbreviated as in the original.

Gleb Arsanov was one of perhaps a few dozen people who, in the late 1950s, made gramophone records out of used X-ray film. The film was free, or nearly: hospitals threw it away by the sack. Cut into discs and run through a recording lathe, it carried a groove well enough for a song to be played a few times before it wore out. The music was whatever could not be bought in the shops, and the image of a stranger's ribcage or skull showed through every copy.

The practice is well attested, and several of the records survive in collections. First-hand accounts by the people who cut them are rarer. Arsanov wrote his in 1989, when it had become possible to say such things aloud, and gave carbon copies to friends. Ours is a late carbon, and some lines had to be supplied from context.

I have kept his short sentences and his habit of stopping a story at the point where most writers would explain it. The slang word for the records was *ribs* or *bones*, and I have used both as he does. Where he names a song I have left the title as he gives it.

The memoir belongs beside two other accounts in this library of people copying what they were not supposed to have. Signal to Noise describes the cassette underground of the 1980s, and the samizdat tradition of retyped literature is defined in the glossary. Arsanov would have recognized both. He would have pointed out that his medium was more fragile than either and that his customers took worse risks.

COLOPHON

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