

The Atlantic

A Country Created Through Music

Estonia sang its way out of the Soviet Union. Can it open up to the world and keep its revolutionary musical tradition intact?



Choir singers at the 2009 song festival in Tallinn, Estonia

Ints Kalnins / Reuters

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Perhaps more than any other country in the world, the history of the Baltic nation of Estonia is a story set to song. Whether under German, Danish, Swedish, or Soviet occupation, Estonians have **long turned to music** as a way of preserving some semblance of national identity amid foreign domination. The country's **massive song festivals**, which date back to 1869, feature a choir of roughly 20,000 to 30,000 singers and have drawn audiences of more than 100,000 people—nearly a tenth of the population. But lately, as Estonia has opened up to the world, the world

has been opening up the country's music scene to diverse influences. Which raises a couple questions: Has Estonian music lost its essence? And, if so, is that something to mourn or cheer?

During the Soviet era, Estonia's song festivals included plenty of Soviet propaganda, but they also offered Estonians an opportunity to celebrate their language and traditions. For the 1947 song festival—the first under the rule of the U.S.S.R.—the composer Gustav Ernesaks set an old poem, “Mu Isamaa On Minu Arm” (My Country Is My Love), to music. Estonians defied Soviet authorities and performed the song during subsequent festivals, and it soon became something of an unofficial national anthem. Other music was less overtly nationalistic: By writing songs ostensibly about Lenin's [sayings on freedom](#), composers like Veljo Tormis gave their music double meanings. The music expressed Estonians' desire for self-determination and pointed out how the Soviet Union had failed to live up to the principles of its founders—all within the confines of communist censorship.

High Quality - "Mu isamaa on minu arm" // Estonian Song Celebration



In the late 1980s, music was the mechanism by which Estonia split from the Soviet Union. During the “Singing Revolution,” large groups of people managed to organize for independence under the guise of gathering to sing. In June 1988, 100,000 Estonians [gathered for five nights](#) to sing protest songs until daybreak.

Singing “Mu Isamaa On Minu Arm” at festivals “is our nation’s most glorious form of self-expression,” [wrote](#) the activist Heinz Valk that month. “A nation who makes its revolution by singing and smiling should be a sublime example to all.” The movement culminated in Estonia [achieving independence](#), nonviolently, in 1991.

Estonian Singing Revolution. 1988



The song festivals, which occur every five years, still draw large crowds and nurture Estonian nationalism. “I think we were expecting 30,000 people singing at a baseball game,” said Maureen Tusty, an American filmmaker who produced the 2007 [documentary](#) *The Singing Revolution* with her husband James. “But it’s really the expertise of the choir—you’re just overwhelmed with voices and the power of the music. It’s a very visceral experience. You feel it in your gut.”

And yet these days, much of the new music coming out of Estonia has little or no connection to this musical patrimony.

“I don’t think we’re really influenced by the traditional Estonian folk music,” said Ewert Sundja, the 32-year-old frontman of the Estonian alternative pop-rock band Ewert and the Two Dragons. He told me that the band’s latest album abandoned Estonian musical elements in favor of more international flavors. Growing up (Sundja was 8 when Estonia gained independence from the Soviets), the musician

listened to American and British music on vinyl. Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Queen, Frank Sinatra, and The Beatles mattered more to him than their Estonian counterparts—mostly, he said, because there weren't “that many cool Estonian bands.” (To this day, [the top songs](#) on Estonian radio tend to be international.) Sundja's band writes English lyrics and has developed a style that sounds like a mix between Imagine Dragons and Bon Iver.

Ewert and The Two Dragons - "Good Man Down" (official video)



During the Soviet occupation of Estonia, popular Western music [was often banned](#) and musicians who didn't want to abide by Soviet restrictions on artistic expression typically went underground. With independence came more freedom for pop, punk, and rock musicians to play what they wished, but there was little infrastructure to support them. During the 1990s, Euro pop dominated Estonian radio (“It was a nightmare, really,” Sundja said)—until the Internet began to expose the still-isolated population to other musical genres.

Today, the domestic music scene is just beginning to take shape. Only five years ago, it was rare for an Estonian act to play outside the country, even in nearby Finland or Latvia. But the Estonian government has invested in the industry by providing grants to promising artists to travel abroad and collaborate with non-Estonian musicians. Estonian universities have begun offering classes in “cultural

management” and music marketing. [Tallinn Music Week](#), a festival in the capital, launched in 2009 and this year hosted 204 artists from 26 countries (though about half the acts were Estonian).

Small countries need to cultivate creative talent, according to Helen Sildna, the festival’s founder. Artists “become the creative brands that you build, they become ambassadors for your country,” she said, citing Ewert and the Two Dragons—who were recently signed on to the American label Sire Records by [the same man](#) who signed the Ramones, Depeche Mode, and Madonna—as an exemplar of Estonia’s burgeoning music scene.

But integrating into the international music scene risks diluting the distinctiveness, and the unique political pedigree, of traditional Estonian music—at a time when the government is more broadly trying to rebrand the country in the post-Soviet world as a hub for [digital innovation](#) and the kind of [political progressivism](#) found in many Nordic countries. (I traveled to Estonia as part of the Foreign Affairs Ministry’s “[100 Friends](#)” program, designed to encourage foreign journalists to explore Estonian identity.)

“Why do we need more of the same when we could have the never-heard-before?”

This isn’t to suggest that identifiably Estonian music is a lost art—classical music by composers such as [Arvo Pärt](#) remains popular—but it is to suggest that almost three decades after the Singing Revolution, the definition of what constitutes Estonian music is in flux, if such a category can ever really encapsulate the various musical strains a nation produces.

Many young Estonians, born in a post-Soviet era, find the kinds of music and lyrics that once prevailed at song festivals out of date and difficult to identify with. “The Estonian music scene in its entirety is, just like the country itself, very young and vulnerable,” said the [electronic DJ and classical musician](#) Sander Mölder, who sang in choirs throughout his childhood.

The **producer and artist** Andres Lõo believes the notion of musicians drawing on their country's folk-music history to be unique is clichéd. “Why do we need more of the same when we could have the never-heard-before?” he asked me. But the question places musicians in a bind: If turning to a nation's heritage in order to make distinctive music is itself a cliché, how can artists remain authentic?

Maarja Nuut, a 29-year-old folk musician and scholar, was only 5 when the Singing Revolution occurred, but she remembers it clearly. Her parents were involved in the underground rebellion and her father was beaten by the KGB. But she said that most of her generation doesn't have the same kind of emotional connection to the movement. Her **repertoire combines** motifs from centuries-old Estonian music with modern electronic elements like the loop pedal.



“You give the first impression,” Nuut said, in reference to the responsibility she feels when playing Estonian music for people who have never heard it before. “But I think it shouldn't be too important to label yourself with a nationality. If you have something to say, and it carries the sound or the atmosphere of that country, that's the perfect combination.”

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