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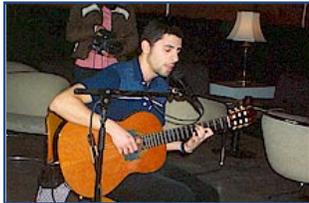
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Starry-eyed in Texas

March 29, 2006
by Anna Hanks



THE POOR SWEDE: Jose Gonzalez, a Swedish musician, had similar problems to Gora's at the festival.

AUSTIN - Like thousands of others, 22-year-old Latvian singer-songwriter Goran Gora packed his bags, his guitar and his dreams of musical success, and brought them all to the 20th South by Southwest (SXSW) music festival in sunny Austin, Texas, from March 15 to 19. It was his first trip to America. Not everything went well.

Gora's big moment at the festival came on March 16 at Spiro's Club in downtown Austin, just blocks from a surprise Beastie Boys concert. After a rudimentary sound check, Gora introduced himself by saying he was from Riga and a bit far from home. "Perhaps, too far," Gora said, his light blue eyes scanning the trickle of patrons.

For his SXSW show, Gora alternately played acoustic guitar and keyboards, while his manager, Toms Grevins, 24, a lanky figure with floppy hair covering his eyes, hunched over a laptop computer perched on a tall cocktail table, added subtle background beats. During Gora's more subdued set, Spiro's back patio featured the intense Luxembourg musician Daniel Balthasar. Whenever the patio door opened, Gora's music was overwhelmed by the waves of sound crashing through.

"I think they put them on the wrong stage, with the loud stuff in the back," Ron Sartor, 31, Gora's SXSW sound engineer said.

"Like a knife in the back," Gora said.

European dreams

Gora showed up in Texas with two managers in tow, Grevins, a DJ, and Dace Volfa, 33, an editor at the Latvian music magazine, "Muzikas Saule."

It may seem counter-intuitive, but Team Goran's goal for SXSW was to introduce Gora to the European music industry. The whole thing was Grevins' idea. "It's the same recognition as playing 30 gigs across Europe," he said.

This year's SXSW was the largest ever, with 1,400 acts performing at nearly 60 venues, most of them around Austin's Sixth Street entertainment district. The Arctic Monkeys, Jim Noir and The Magic Numbers (all from the United Kingdom) and the Swedish musician Ane Brun were all there.

Gora was one of only a thimbleful of eastern and central European acts at this year's SXSW and Gora claims to be the festival's first Baltic act since Latvia's New Moon performed in 1992.

Latvians may be more familiar with Gora's bittersweet English-language ballads. Last week, "Two Hands" held the number fourteen spot at the commercially-owned, Latvia-wide, pop-rock station Radio SWH.

This past January, Gora performed "Fools in Love" live on Latvian television for a half-million people at the SWH Latvian Music Awards, where viewers voted on 15 song performances. Gora came in eighth. For those who haven't heard Gora, his music is reminiscent of the Icelandic music he adores (Bjork, Sugarcubes, Mum), and invokes current radio hits like James Blunt's "You're Beautiful" and "Goodbye My Lover" and Belle & Sebastian's "Another Sunny Day."

You might expect someone who makes such sad and lovelorn recordings to be glum, but Gora is positively bubbly. That said, with his compact frame, close-cropped brown hair and black suit jacket, he physically resembles mope master Morrissey, onetime singer for The Smiths.

Gora (born Janis Holsteins) currently lives at home with his family in Baldone, Latvia, a hamlet of 7,000, within commuting distance of Riga. According to Gora, the tiny town is home to five bands.

"For that city, five bands is a lot," Gora said. "I'm the only one ...known outside Baldone."

It's a musical family, he says, and has been very supportive of his career. Gora's older brother Kristaps Holsteins, 24, planned on attending SXSW, but stayed home to supervise the production of the CD "2 Hands/ 4 Songs" being pressed in the Czech Republic. Though it's primarily destined for Iceland and London, Gora hopes to have his recording in a Riga music store and some art galleries.

Gora started writing music in 2000. After teaching himself guitar and piano, he made several homemade albums on his tape recorder, including "A Muadoil" and "Birdie." He passed these around to friends. About a year ago, Gora recorded some demo tracks at a friend's basement studio in Baldone. His friends sent these demos to Grevins new music show "Basement." When Grevins played Gora's music, people contacted him asking for more.

"A lot more than usual for a new person. I can't remember a situation like this," Grevins said, describing the unprecedented response to Gora's music.

After meeting in person at a Pajaat Records event in Baldone, the pair headed to a professional recording studio for Gora's song "Slow Down," with Grevins doing what he called "producer work."

Soon, a Swedish promoter called Grevins to find out what was happening in Latvia. That's how Gora ended up playing Stockholm's Baltic Sea Festival last August.

This past Christmas, Gora played a sold-out show to an audience of over 500 at Cinema Riga, backed by a string quartet and trumpet.

American blues

Gora wasn't the only one to have sound problems at SXSW. A Saturday afternoon SXSW set by Swedish singer-songwriter Jose Gonzalez at another tiny club was difficult to hear because of sound intruding from the heavily amplified band on the club's patio.

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"It's cool in many ways," Gonzalez said about SXSW. "The only problem is that you don't get a sound check."

On his way back to Latvia, Gora played a set on March 20 in Jersey City, New Jersey, arranged by friends of Team Goran. The fifty people in the audience included nearly a dozen Latvians.

Gora's SXSW showcase and his Jersey show are but two events in a busy musical year.

At SXSW, Gora personally gave CDs of his work to some of his favorite artists, including Iceland's Mum and American singer-songwriter Willy Mason. Gora was thrilled to have approached Mason. Giving your CD to a celebrity is a "very un-Latvian thing to do," he said.

"I am a musician and I play music," he said. "But I've never felt like I've been part of the musicians' family," Gora said. That all changed at SXSW. "I have a feeling that I am one of the musicians. It feels like we are all the same."

"I think that we did all we wanted to at SXSW, played, gave away CD's. I suppose the future will tell if it was worth it," an upbeat Gora said after his Jersey City show.

Gora's own SXSW highlights included performances by UK acts Art Brut, the Editors and Belle & Sebastian, and a spontaneous pre-festival jam session at the home of his SXSW host Michael Wimer, 48. Wimer has hosted bands for 13 years for SXSW's international hospitality program. Last year he hosted Sweden's Thomas Denver Jonsson, whom Gora toured with in Latvia.

"I try to show them southern hospitality," Wimer said, which included transporting gear for Gora's show in his van.

Gora is now preparing for two London shows. His future plans include studio time in June, a pan-Baltic tour this summer and an album in November.

"I wouldn't come if I didn't think this artist was worth it," Volfa said at the beginning of SXSW. "Hope we aren't the only ones" who feel that way, she added.

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