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Piter People: The American shanty-man of St Petersburg

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From Seattle to St Petersburg, American indie folk musician, Robert Palomo, tells his tale of living in Russia’s northern latitudes for more than 21 years, finding love in a Soviet ship, writing sea songs, and, Za Bortom!

I got to know Robert Palomo when he honoured the victims of the St Petersburg metro attack with a sea song about the waters and cold weather of the city in May 2017—“Sky above us is cloudy and gray; Just like it will be tomorrow and just like it was yesterday; So heave up the anchor and let us away; Under skies that be cloudy and cold.”

Admiring his gesture and having loved world folk music for years, I was

immediately intrigued and wanted to learn more about his music. He describes himself as “an ex-pot-smoking ex-hippie musician with a weakness for salty sea song”—when I read that I knew I had to meet him.

Despite my efforts, Robert didn't allow me to call him “the Pirate of St Petersburg”, instead, he told me about folk music in Russia, sea shanties, the similarities between Russians and Americans, and, finding happiness in simplicity.

Where do you hail from and what is your background in music?

I was born in Columbus, Ohio, and grew up in a small rural community not far from there. My early musical background was classical. I started playing the trumpet at the age of 8. Actually, my natural talent is with string instruments—my favourite childhood toys were all toy string instruments. I attended the Indiana University School of Music, which at the time was considered to have the best university level opera program in the U.S. I majored in applied music, training to be a symphonic trumpeter. Upon graduation, I found that jobs were few and far between, and I gradually fell back on self-taught guitar and bass guitar skills. It was work. For most of my adult life through the mid-1980s I alternated between music and different “day jobs”.



Photo credit: Robert Polamo's personal archive

How did you end up in Russia? Can you share a little bit of your love story with us?

The answer to that needs a book-length memoir! The sub-atomic particle version goes something like this: in 1991 I finished my IT degree and moved to Seattle, Washington, where job prospects in my field were better than in the heartland. I had no sooner arrived than a rag-tag flotilla of Russian ships, powered by New Russian money, made port. They were in the process of retracing the voyage of the explorer Vitus Bering 250 years later, when the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed. The ships were stranded in Seattle with no means of paying for fuel, moorage, etc. – a situation which took some time to iron out. On one of those ships was the amazing woman with whom I will celebrate 25 years of marriage on New Year's Eve of this year.

How has living in Russia changed your life?

That's another question that requires a chapter or two in the ol' memoir book. I think the main life lessons for me have been these:

1. People everywhere are fundamentally the same. The differences are like the different spices in food. My experience has taught me that Russians and Americans have much more in common with each other than both have with many other cultures. But for a colossal failure of so-called leadership on both sides of the proverbial fence, which spans pretty much my entire lifetime, there is no earthly reason our two peoples should be enemies.
2. I learned I didn't actually need 1/10th the amount of "stuff" that I had been programmed my entire life in America to think I needed. When I first got here, I discovered how people were living quite OK in much smaller spaces, cooking in smaller kitchens, etc. And they mostly all had these quaint rustic summer homes! It was a whole different paradigm. Consumerism has since taken deeper root here, but I think not to the extent it has in the U.S.

Is it difficult to find the right audience for your genre of music in Russia? How popular is folk music here?

For me it is difficult. It's partly because Russian is my 4th language, I'll probably never be really fluent, and it's difficult for me to approach potential venues on my own. But even if I were better at that, I find the club scene here is pretty rigidly regimented as to musical genres.

The best outlet for the kind of music I've been working on the past few years has been the Shanty Choir of the Russian tall ship MIR. It's a big, all-volunteer group – as many as 10 people, though we don't all make every performance. Our last local gig was at the SPb Naval Museum, celebrating the birthday of the *telnyashka* – the striped Russian sailor's jersey. It was that group that influenced me to try my hand at writing new

sea songs after the old style.

I think Russian folk is more widely popular here than world folk – and why not? But there seems to be a budding international folk scene in Moscow, and I'm acquainted with a couple of musicians there who are making it happen. I expect it will gravitate to Piter eventually.

How is an ex-pot- smoking ex-hippie musician loving St Petersburg? What do you like most about this city and its waters? Do they inspire your music?

I really do love the city centre, and Vasilievsky Island where we lived for most of the time I've been here. The cathedral of Peter and Paul fortress is my favourite landmark. The White Nights are of course the best of the best. And November really does suck. But that's all part of the experience. I really like how the restaurant scene has blossomed – Piter has really become a great food and drink town with some really talented young chefs and restaurateurs.

Now that you mention it, the city has actually inspired several original songs, only one of which I ever released. The others are sitting in my back catalogue, as they fall into genres I'm not working in right at the moment. But just last April I released a sea song that was directly inspired by the aftermath of the bombing attack in the metro. I was really impressed by the way the people of the city spontaneously came together that day to help each other get home in the evening when the transit was shut down. I had been working on a song that was mainly a complaint about how winter was dragging on and on this year, but I made some quick changes and turned it into a kind of salty salute to the people of my adopted hometown... appropriately titled Cloudy and Cold.

Tell us about your new work, new music and new

collaborations?

The most exciting thing going on now is preparing to play at the Harwich International Sea Shanty Festival(<http://harwichshantifestival.co.uk/>) in England in mid-October. I was raised on English literature and although I've travelled quite a bit around Europe, I've never visited England. Finally getting to go there, and getting to share my music with real fans of the maritime music, well, I think the Brits' expression for it is: "I'm over the moon!"

Sea shanties were never meant to be concert music... they were a very social thing, with people working and singing together. So it seemed a bit wrong to try to do the Harwich festival as a solo. Fortunately, two of my fellow choristers from the Shanty Choir MIR, Peter Dyson and David Hicks, also long-term expats, are native Britons and they were quite receptive to the idea of forming a trio and introducing me to their native soil, as it were. So we have been rehearsing, and will perform at the festival under the Russian name *Za Bortom!* – the Russian sailor's warning of a man fallen overboard. We loosely translated that to English as *Men Overboard*.

At the festival, I'll be premiering and releasing a studio recording of a new original halyard shanty called *Davy Jones*(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfyTpJCPEgM>), which I've had in my back catalogue for a while and was looking for a good occasion to release. I can't think of a better one!

What does the future hold for Robert Palomo?

I spend way too much time on the internet and I really want to connect more with people non-virtually. I would love to find ways to perform locally too. If any of your readers have some ideas for that, I'll be happy if they'll contact me on my website(<http://www.robertpalomo.com/>), where they

can listen to my music for free(<http://www.robertpalomo.com/music/>).