* In the middle of the 80s an enormous number of domestic heavy metal bands came to stage. We could say it was the first wave of Russian Heavy Metal. What can you say about that time?
* *I just don’t know… I feel nostalgic about those years. Back then we had to constantly be on our toes – we always had some committees or administrators getting in our way. There was this wall that messed with our lives, but our lives were interesting. Right now the wall is gone, and it is not clear what to do next… All people want nowadays is to make some money and retire… Some still have their drive, their energy, but life gets more and more difficult. Apathy is everywhere…*

From a 1992 interview with Valery Kipelov, Aria’s vocalist[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Now, in 1999, seven years, two full albums and several independent projects later, Aria is still going strong, filling up the largest stadiums and arenas, and selling out practically every concert.

 It all started back in 1984, when Vladimir Holstinin, a lead guitar player for a group called ALFA decided that he wanted to play something heavier and left the group in search of others who shared his views. With the help of Alexandr Granovsky, an old friend and a base player, and a lucky meeting with Vladimir Vekshtein who agreed to become their manager, a new group was born. Finding a worthy vocalist was only a matter of time. It did not take too long, since the very first candidate won everybody’s affections. It was Valery Kipelov, a former vocalist for a band called Leisja Pesnja. With Aleksandr L’vov at the drums and Cyrill Pokrovsky at the keyboards the fist album named “Megalomania” was recorded in 1985. The group called themselves Aria, which bore a hidden challenge, since the musicians and the fans alike called themselves “arians” – a name displeasing to the authorities at the time[[2]](#footnote-2). Despite such a name, the group never associated itself with nazi-type outlook on life.

 The communists did not even allow printing posters with the bands’ name, but despite the lack of publicity the first album was a hit. It showed the need for heavy metal in the Soviet Union, the unwillingness of young men and women to follow communist propaganda, to listen to the popular music they were presented with on the radio and TV. They were willing to risk their futures and freedoms to live the life they wanted.

The tension around Aria was growing, and it turned into a riot at the very first concert of the band in February of ’86, when 40 people ended up in jail. But that was only the beginning. At the “Rock-Panorama” festival same year someone spilled water on the electrical equipment during the band’s performance. The music had to stop for almost an hour, but no one from the audience left. Aria was named the winner of the festival, despite lousy sound and lack of special effects due to water damage. «Melodia» – the official recording studio in USSR – later released LPs recorded at the festival – Aria’s performance was not included on the LPs. Due to that incident, the poets at that time refused to write lyrics for Aria, presuming that none of Aria’s future songs would ever be recorded. In spite of the future looking glum, the band continued touring and getting enormous audiences everywhere it went.

 At the end of 1986 after recording the next album («Whom Are You With?») disagreements caused the band to split, leaving only Kipelov and Holstinin as members of Aria. Alex Granovsky led the others to create a band called Master, which focused on playing trash metal, while Aria continued to play the melodic heavy metal of their idol, Iron Maiden. The album was named after one of the songs, but the name also signified the break, leaving the fans with a choice to make.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Despite the loss of the larger part of the band, its spirit was still strong. About half a year after the break, the “new” band released a fantastic album “Hero of Asphalt”. The words for this album were finally written by a professional poet, Margarita Pushkina, whose lyrics enhanced and empowered the band's music. The album is still considered one of their best, and the songs that comprised it are played at every concert. Unlike the first two albums, this one was released on an LP rather than on tape. The communists finally recognized the band – and LP release was official. However, they renamed the album without ever consulting the band (the original album name was same as one of the songs -- “Serving Evil Forces”) to make it “less offensive”. Also, they chose not to pay the musicians a dime.

 For two years after the release of “Hero of Asphalt” Aria was on tour, going from city to city in Russia, as well as the satellite countries. However, when an invitation came in 1988 to go to the Capital Radio festival in London, the government informed the festival authorities that the band did not perform live. They were clearly threatened by the effect the band might have on the opinion of the West, as well as the satellites, by going to an international music festival.

 Same year the first music video got filmed for the song “Street of Roses”. The filming caused chaos, since instead of having two or three hundred onlookers, about seven thousand people showed up for the filming; as a result the musicians were practically torn to pieces by the adoring fans that wanted to get close to their idols. The musicians and the administrations learned a lesson in popularity, and the video took the number one spot in the rating.

 In the summer of the same year, Aria finally went abroad to Germany, where the musicians got an invitation to the “Days of the Wall” festival, where they surprised everybody with their music and won the sympathy of the people.

 Around the same time the band's manager, whose outstanding leadership took the band past all the barricades built by communists, suddenly lost interest in the group. He told the band that their music was loosing popularity, that they should try to give as many concerts as possible and retire. He insisted that there was no need to work on a new album. The lack of productivity and the uncertainty of tomorrow took its toll; the drummer, Maksim Udalov, left for a band called Zenitsa Oka. Aleksandr Manjakin took his place. In the fall the band was forced to retire its manager, since the musicians were not ready to give up what they have so hard worked for. Their next album titled “Playing with Fire” was released the following spring. Margarita Pushkina became the official writer for the band, Yury Fishkin became the manager.

 Another long tour followed, with visits to Germany, where the group lost its guitar and base players to a local band. Their places were taken by Dmitry Gorbatikov and Andrey Bulkin. The tour continued, but professionally, the band was going nowhere. Fortunately, the two “traitors” come back, just in time for their fifth anniversary shows in October of 1990.

 The next album “Blood for Blood” was released in the fall of 1991. The album had a new crisp sound, the band was experimenting with new types of guitars, but their theme of Good vs. Evil continued[[4]](#footnote-4). However, Sintez Studios where the album was recorded was definitely not equipped to handle the heavy guitar riffs or the drumbeat the band produced. The recorded version sounded distorted, but the tour that followed the album release made up for that and once again crowds gathered in all parts of the country to see their idols perform live.

 In 1993 Aria decided to create its own recording studio in order to avoid the problems they faced with their previous albums. In 1994 they signed a contract with MOROZ Records – one of the largest recording companies that produced for many of the artists that came out of the Soviet era. The studio released compilations entitled “Legends of Russian Rock” with digitally re-mastered sound for such monsters as Alisa, Akvarium, Kino, Krematorii and many others. Since then Moroz Records had re-released all five of Aria’s earlier albums, and published all of their following projects.

In 1994, after their fourth Germany tour, the band came to the brink of extinction, when the vocalist abandoned Aria for Master several months before recording their next album. Sergei Mavrin (guitar) became discouraged and also left. Fortunately, Sergei Terent’ev, a very talented guitar player who had just recorded his solo album at Aria Records offered his services. After several months of trying to record with Aleksei Bulgakov (vocalist from Legion), the band got Kipelov to record the vocals for the new album. It took a threat of pressing charges for breach of contract from the owner of Moroz Record to get Kipelov to come back[[5]](#footnote-5).

“Night is Shorter Than the Day” was released at the end of 1995. The album was still Aria style, but the style seemed to be changing; in addition to their usual crisp, angry, Good vs. Evil songs, there were several mellow songs, more associated with rock than heavy metal. Opinions about the album split. Some called it the best to date, while others attributed it to the death of metal[[6]](#footnote-6).

The tour following the release of “Night is Shorter Than the Day” was in the best traditions of the 80’s, loud and nerve-wrecking for local governments. This could be attributed to the new manager Sergei Zadora, who did a large advertising campaign for the tour. It is on that tour that the band celebrated its ten-year anniversary and released a live album titled “Made in Russia” as its gift to all the fans.

In 1997 Moroz Records released the second of its “Legends of Russian Rock” series, with Aria being one of the six performers in that series. The compilation is a “best of” collection, with digitally re-mastered sound and a detailed band history booklet[[7]](#footnote-7). It also included the song “Give Me Your Hand” previously only released on the tape version of “Hero of Asphalt”, a song that was for marketing reasons excluded from the re-mastered CD version of the album re-released in 1994. The song expressed the musicians’ feelings during the break in 1986 when Master was created.

Also in 1997, the musicians decided to realize their differences in music without jeopardizing the band; they recorded individual projects. Valery Kipelov, along with his old friends Alex Granovsky, Sergei Mavrin, and Pavel Chinjakov recorded a pure hard rock compilation that is full of patriotic and cultural themes of Russia. At the same time Vitaly Dubinin, Vladimir Hosltinin, and Alexandr Manjakin recorded a “hits re-mixed” album titled “Accident”, where old hits were given a new life when played in a mellow soft-rock style. The album was somewhat comical, which was reflected in the album title, and even in the caricature portrayal of the musicians on the cover. Nevertheless it was not to be taken lightly – it took a lot of work, and it contained two new songs.

In 1998 the band released another masterpiece for its fans. The quality of their work was getting better and better, which was possible due to fewer disagreements among the musicians and less shuffling between other bands. The reason for the latter was a lack of new bands being created, and the old ones settling their ranks. One way or another “Generator of Evil” once again topped the charts and brought the band’s fans together for yet another tour. The songs in this album still followed the Good vs. Evil theme, but they were more down to earth, creating more realistic images than those of Pontius Pilate as does “Blood for Blood”, or Queen Zhanna of France as does “Street of Roses”. The songs convey the messages that were too dangerous during the communist reign. Being a decade too late with their messages was the price they paid for freedom to perform for the past fifteen years.

In 1999 the first part of the long anticipated “best of” album was released. It contained hits from 1985 to 1989 and brought new popularity for old songs. The album was meant to be a taste of what the future holds, with the next album anticipated early in the year 2000. The times that were chosen to separate the “best of “ album were meant to divide the music into pre- and post- communist periods.

Aria is unique in many ways. No other band in Russia has known so much popularity for so long, no band has been able to attract generation after generation of fans for fifteen years[[8]](#footnote-8). Not too many bands during soviet time were able to perform their music so close to what they wanted it to be; almost none were known to be as much trouble for the government and were still kept around. Aria started out as “Russian Iron Maiden”. Many still say they are. However, you will never hear Maiden address the themes encountered in Aria’s songs – love, loneliness, as well as the usual themes in Heavy Metal – Good vs. Evil, tales of things from long ago, and mystical heroes. Very few bands outside USSR ever had cope with censorship in music and lyrics in order to play. In Russian Rock, emphasis is placed on lyrics, people sing to express themselves, Aria expresses everything through music, perhaps because lyrics were off limits for a long time. Very few bands went through so many changes and still stayed together. Aria is inherent to Russia – its’ success anywhere in the world is highly doubtful.

To address the extract from a 1992 interview with Valery Kipelov in the very beginning, the future is not as dark as it seemed back then. A new generation of “arians” is born every year – and as long as the group exists they will find all the motivation they may ever want in the eyes of a fifteen-year-old coming to an Aria concert for the first time in his or her life…

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*ARIA – THE HISTORY OF A LEGEND.*

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