

# Okean Elzy bring Ukrainian rock n' roll to Vancouver

Teresa Stolarskyj – *Ukrainian Weekly* – December 23, 2007

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Fans of Okean Elzy in Canada and the US have recently been abuzz on Facebook. Since the Ukrainian rock n' roll group announced a handful of North American dates on their current "I'm Going Home" tour, the online social networking site has been active with fans connecting, sharing ticket details and discussing travel plans. Surely enough, fans from across BC's Lower Mainland and from across the US border made the trek to Vancouver's Plaza Club for the group's November 6<sup>th</sup> performance.

Given that Vancouver is not especially known as a hotbed of Ukrainian culture in Canada, and that no Ukrainian act has previously launched an independent, self-supporting tour, the band's draw of a few hundred ardent followers was impressive enough. Comprised largely of Ukrainian and Russian émigrés, the audience spanned a demographic where teens and parents arrived together, the latter equally familiar with the group's songs, and no less shy about dancing and cheering at the foot of the stage. Enthusiasm ran high, with fans proudly wearing and waving Ukrainian flags, breaking into ardent chants of "U-rka-ji-na!!" or cheering the singer by his diminutive name, "Slaava!!"

Over the course of the two and a half hour set, Okean Elzy demonstrated adeptly why they stand as the most successful popular music group in post-Soviet Ukraine and, arguably, in the entire CIS. With all songs and discourse delivered in Ukrainian, the evening's repertoire spanned the group's 13-year career, including hits such as "Kishka," "Bez Boyu" and "Kholodno" alongside new songs from their most recent release, *Mira*. Despite a change in most of the group's lineup in 2004, singer Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, bassist Denys Dudko, keyboardist Milos Jelic, guitarist Petro Cherniavskyj and drummer Denys Hlinin gel naturally, each demonstrating both technical excellence and maturity as a cohesive unit. Vakarchuk is a powerful presence onstage, passionately loping, skipping and dancing as if in a trance. His is a natural sensitivity for, and easy connection with, the audience, often reaching to meet their outstretched hands or to accept the gifts of flowers and stuffed animals some extended. While the group's four musicians typically hang back slightly from the spotlight to allow Vakarchuk command of the performance, the singer often allows his band mates a turn to shine. All five refreshingly belie the stereotype of a typical rock n' roll band, conveying grace and professionalism, a love for creating music, and respect for the opportunity to make it a living. During two well-earned encores, the band jammed more freely than in the main programme, flirting with sounds verging on funk and psychedelia while Vakarchuk scatted his vocals and strutted wildly about the stage. Given his magnetism, a fan commented following the show that, "Slava is so awesome," because "he doesn't do anything stupid for attention."

Indeed, while the group currently enjoys a high degree of popularity, the journey has been a slow, steady climb built on commitment and hard work. Certainly, successful acts preceded Okean Elzy and others have risen as their contemporaries, but Okean Elzy is somewhat unique in capturing the spirit of the generation young enough to have grown up, for the most part, in a free Ukraine. Commercially their milestones are many; the video for their early single, "Tam, de nas nema" was the first Ukrainian music video to air on MTV Russia and France's MCM Channel. The band has also enjoyed various corporate sponsorships, and their songs are heard accompanying commercial advertisements on domestic television.

With fame comes responsibility and opportunity, and Okean Elzy have not been shy in embracing both. Perhaps even more commendable than their professional accomplishments are the storied political and social initiatives in which they have become involved, especially in recent years. Most famously, the group appeared at the front and center of 2004's Orange Revolution, with Vakarchuk emerging as something of its poster-boy. Educated formally in theoretical physics, the singer conveys intelligence and a broad worldview when in interviews, freely discussing the political, cultural and economic challenges of Ukraine as it struggles to develop into a free market and a democracy. He has been involved with literacy support, and has met with domestic University students to help shed light on political issues about which many Ukrainians, due to longstanding control and corruption of much of the domestic media, are mis- or under-informed. In recent years, Vakarchuk has been named an official Ambassador of Ukrainian Culture, UN's Ambassador of Goodwill, and one of Ukraine's 100 most influential people by "Korespondent" Magazine. The group as a whole has also maintained involvement with various high-profile charitable initiatives as well, including a performance in Kosovo at an international peacemakers' conference, and a joint campaign combating human trafficking, founded in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration and MTV Europe Foundation.

One cannot have helped but feel awe thinking about these details while standing stage side, arms' length from these wonderfully accomplished yet humble performers, and feeling the immense pride of the audience in their musical and cultural heroes. The excitement that had been building on a simple Facebook forum burst to life, bypassing linguistic and cultural differences, and making for an unequivocally unique experience on what might have been just another rainy autumn evening in Vancouver.