



# Breaking out from Moscow

A tough man in one of the world's toughest markets, Ed Ratnikov has battled to bring international artistes to fans across the vastness of Russia for 25 years, from the turbulent days just before and after the collapse of the USSR, when doing business was more challenging than most people could imagine.

**Christopher Barrett reports**

One of the pioneers of country-wide touring in Russia, Ed Ratnikov, the founder and president of Moscow-based Talent Concert International (TCI), has been promoting for the past 25 years, helping to open-up the market for international artistes.

Since he founded the company in early July 1995, TCI has

promoted shows by acts including Robbie Williams, Rihanna, Kraftwerk, Limp Bizkit, the Scorpions, Jennifer Lopez, Blur, Nick Cave and Deep Purple.

Moscow and St Petersburg have long been established as tour



Ed Ratnikov

stops, but Ratnikov's vision has never been restricted to the easy locations.

"I worked with TCI on Kraftwerk and we played the Kremlin, which was a landmark concert in the history of the band," says Scumbeck Sabottka,

CEO of promoter and agent MCT Agentur in Germany.

"Ed is not afraid to test the waters for an act all over Russia, the furthest I have gone with him was with [German-Swedish industrial metal band] Lindemann, when he played in Irkutsk, in the middle of Siberia, in the winter at -38 degrees centigrade," he says.





Rammstein

halls with capacities of between 4,000 and 5,000.

The following year it was the turn of Uriah Heep, who played a 20-date national tour.

"Then it become business as usual, we organised tours with Rollins Band, Faith No More, Motörhead, Slayer, Manowar and [MCT artiste] Rammstein," says Ratnikov.

When TCI was launched, the market was comparatively undeveloped and Nadia Solovieva's SAV in Moscow was one of the very few internationally-recognised promoters.

"Besides SAV and couple of other companies including Rise Music and Silence Pro, there were no other professional promoters," he says. "Rise Music was mostly working with national talent and Silence Pro closed after losing a fortune on a Rolling Stones show in Moscow.

"The Russian live music market was no market at all at the time. There was absolutely no systems, infrastructure or services, but I saw it as a great challenge, I wanted to go my own way and make people laugh and cry at the shows I promoted."

Ratnikov didn't establish TCI on passion alone, he also had considerable experience. After managing a few Russian rock bands, who he promoted around Western Europe in the late 1980's, he went on to work with Boris Zosimov at BIZ Enterprises as an A&R at its Alien Records label.

At BIZ, Ratnikov worked on one of the biggest concerts of all time – the Monsters Of Rock festival in Moscow in 1991 saw an estimated 1.6 million people descend on Tushino Airfield to see acts



Ed Ratnikov

including AC/DC, Metallica and The Black Crows.

Taking place just one month after the Soviet coup d'état attempt to overthrow president Mikhail Gorbachev, footage of the concert shows the huge crowd going wild despite there reportedly being 1,000 militiamen surrounding the stage.

The event was just over three years since Uriah Heep's historic

10-night run of Moscow shows, with a combined audience of 185,000, in December 1987 – the first major rock shows allowed from the west. The band was invited to perform to show the world that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Russia were relaxing their iron grip on culture and the media.

Just months after the Monsters of Rock event, the USSR ▶

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collapsed, Gorbachev resigned and Boris Yeltsin became president of Russia and its remaining federation. Russia was open for business.

For Ratnikov, working on shows that stir emotions has always been one of his prime motivations and being a rock fan himself, working with them was a natural calling.

"I want the shows I promote to make people feel alive," he says. "I think it was especially important in Russia in the 1980s because after all those years of being denied the music they loved, people were very hungry for concerts, especially the youth.

"I think you do your best and most successful work when you understand and love what you are doing. Our business is to stir emotions, and the best way to do that is by being passionate about what you do. I don't think of it as a job, it is some kind of mission."

Ratnikov had forged deals with UK agent Neil Warnock at The Agency Group (now UTA) for TCI's first national tours, with Nazareth and Uriah Heep, and proved that playing cities such as Murmansk, Tver, Samara, Ekaterinburg and Perm, as well as Moscow and St Petersburg, was an endeavour worth the effort. The next step was to meet the rest of the key agents in London.



Schumek Sabottka

His persistence would pay off and TCI went on to work on national tours with acts including The Prodigy, KORN and ITB's Scorpions and Limp Bizkit.

"Ed promoted Ozzy Osbourne in Russia and did a great job," says ITB co-founder Rod MacSween. "TCI has been trail-breaking and very innovative."

### Ambitious vision

Among the many artistes that TCI has



Ed Ratnikov with Slayer



Ed Ratnikov with J-Lo

had a long relationship with is German rock act Rammstein.

"In March 2001, my old friend and partner [international talent broker] Nick Hobbs sent me a demo CD of Rammstein's third album *Mutter*," says Ratnikov.

"When I heard those riffs I knew it was an epic album so I spoke to then Rammstein manager Emu Fialik and the band's agent Scumek Sabottka who decided to come to Russia to check out a Megadeth show I was working on in early July 2001, at Luzhnik Stadium [capacity 81,000].

"They left understanding how it would work in Russia and since then we have had some glorious years."

Sabottka says, "Ed and his team had

# Congratulations Ed and all at TCI on 25 years, here's to many more!

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Ed Ratnikov with Rihanna



Ed Ratnikov with The Black Eyed Peas

enough vision to put on a band that sings in German. In the climate back then that was unusual, but he had faith and guided us through thick and thin and Russia is now one of the biggest markets for Rammstein."

Ratnikov's level of commitment to Rammstein and its team was vividly illustrated in early 2010 when he found himself stuck between a rock band and a hard politician.

In December the previous year a tragic fire had killed 150 people at the Lame Horse nightclub in the town of Perm.

"President Putin had to say something to the nation, and he did not find anything better to say than to outlaw the use of pyrotechnic effects, which had started the fire.

"Rammstein had sold-out shows in Moscow

and St Petersburg in late February and after Rammstein there was Metallica and other big acts scheduled with pyro elements in their shows. Of course, no officials wanted to talk about permits for pyro, so we were stuck," he says.

Undeterred, Ratnikov petitioned the Minister for Emergency Situations, Sergey Shoygu, and succeeded in having the ban lifted. The shows went ahead and Rammstein played to 60,000 delighted fans.

A producer and booking director at the Tele-Club (1,500) in Ekaterinburg, Semyon Galperin first met Ratnikov in 2006 while working for MTV. He'll never forget just how persuasive

Ratnikov can be.

"Ed had a Bloodhound Gang show at an ice hockey arena in Ekaterinburg, it was a big deal and we were covering the show. The first thing he said to me was 'why aren't you running? Things get done faster when you run'. He obviously didn't know I was an MTV guy and thought I was a promoter, which I later became. But I think even if he knew who I was his attitude would have been much the same."

A year later, Bloodhound Gang were booked to play the opening night of the Tele-Club and Galperin has been asked to help out. He became a little nervous when he heard that Ratnikov was due to come by and inspect the venue the night before the show.

"The venue wasn't finished and I knew Ed was a tough guy, so I was worried he would f\*\*king kill me, but I didn't know the extent of venue's incompleteness," he says.



Nick Hobbs

"When we entered, we saw a hundred workers, in clouds of concrete dust, trying to make the floor flat and build the stage and the balcony. A moment of silence followed, then Ed looked me in the eye and said quietly, 'Well, we're not going to tell the band about this until tomorrow, are we?'. I said, 'No, of course not!'. Then he said, 'I know you can do this Semyon. I believe in you!'

**To Ed, Nikolai, Sergey and all at TCI - Happy Silver Jubilee!**

**It's been the greatest of pleasures to work together for 23 years.**

**Nick & the Garmenko team**



"I still worked for MTV and had nothing to do with the venue, they had just asked me to help as I knew English. So I said, 'Yeah I'll do it Ed. Don't worry Ed, things are gonna be just fine.'

"Luckily, the next day a hundred workers finished the job on time, and Tele-Club soon hired me as a head of programming.

"Ed is a great partner once you have earned his respect. You can trust his word 100 per cent."

### Pioneering spirit

UK-born pan-European booker and promoter Nick Hobbs, whose company Charmenko is now based in Turkey, with offices in Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia and Croatia, has worked with TCI on Rammstein ever since sending that promo CD to Ratnikov.

"Russia remains limited to Moscow and St Petersburg for the great majority of international acts, regional tours are still quite rare and anyone, such as TCI, who take international acts on tour in the provinces deserves a medal for courage," says Hobbs.

Hobbs says he has always found TCI to be both highly reliable and professional, and commends its efforts in a market that is far from easy to navigate.

"Every time you bring a major act into Russia it is a challenge – a challenge with customs, with visas, with weather, with geography, with currency fluctuations, dealing with officials and so on," says Hobbs. "To be a major promoter in Russia you need a titanium backbone."

Moscow's Luzhnik Stadium (81,000), is the largest in Russia and its manager Vitali Mant has worked with TCI on many shows there, including Rammstein last year.

Mant also first engaged with TCI on a show by Rammstein when he worked at the city's Olimpiyski Stadium (28,000) in 2010.

"Ed and his team are great professionals, as well as very decent people and they always fulfill their obligations," he says.

"In 2017 a Robbie Williams concert was canceled due to the artiste being ill. In this acute situation, the TCI team and the Olimpiyski sports complex did everything possible to deal with the situation honourably."

"Ed is a trusted, reliable and creative partner in a country which can have its difficulties ... and he's a gentlemen, I should add," says Williams' agent Ian Huffam at X-ray Touring in the UK.

TCI now has 13 employees but in the early days it consisted of just three people; Ratnikov, Peter Smirnov and Tatiana

Dalskaya.

"I did a lot of work in those days, almost everything," says Ratnikov.

### Team strengths

Not only has the in-house TCI team grown to include key staff such as finance director Nikolay Sinitsyn, booking and operations manager Serget Podgorny and special projects manager Julia Doroshina, the company has also forged many long lasting partnerships. They include St Petersburg-based National Concert Academy (NCA).

"I was surprised to find Ed at my office with a bunch of tour posters with an empty space for the venue, and a one-page contract. He had travelled 700km."

Michael Shurygin

"I first met Ed back in 1997, a year before I started my own business," says NCA owner and MD Michael Shurygin. "I was working as the manager of the Hollywood Nights club in St Petersburg. I was approached by Ed to do a show by German metal band Accept at our club. But I was just a young manager and I didn't have the authority to confirm anything, so I asked them to come over from Moscow and do a presentation of the show.

"The next morning I was surprised to find Ed at my office with a bunch of tour posters with an empty space for the venue, and a one-page contract. He had travelled 700km and didn't want to go back without me confirming — he was very enthusiastic. That's one of the reasons why TCI have been so successful, they are very persuasive."

Among the many successful shows that TCI and NCA have partnered on are

Robbie Williams and Ozzy Osbourne at the 10,600-capacity Ledovy Dvoretz arena in St Petersburg and Rammstein at the city's Gazprom Arena (55,000).

"You can always be sure TCI will deliver," says Shurygin. "I feel very confident with them, even when we are competing with them for an artistes, because we know it is a fair competition – they won't overpay, they won't badmouth you to the agent and they will not lie to you. That may be an old style way of working but I appreciate that way of doing business."

Ratnikov says, "Our teams are absolutely integrated, we share philosophy and working methods as well as profits and losses in the projects we collaborate on. Sometimes NCA proposes acts to us, sometimes we propose to them, but nobody dominates, we are partners."

In October last year German pan-Europe promoting and ticking powerhouse CTS Eventim acquired a 51 per cent TCI, bringing it into its Eventim Live network, which comprises 28 promoters organising 30 festivals and more than 5,000 live events annually.

"The Russian market is very important to a growing number of internationally popular artistes, and few companies bring as many acts from abroad to Russia as TCI," says CTS founder and CEO Klaus-Peter Schulenberg.

Ratnikov and Sinitsyn continue as TCI's senior management, and collectively hold the remaining 49 per cent of company shares.

"I am not expecting immediate benefits from becoming part of the Eventim family, it's business as usual for us, but now we can take a little more risks and increase the number of shows we work on. As Klaus-Peter says, we will maintain the name and logo and keep working as before, but all main decisions have to be made with Eventim Live. ▶



Klaus-Peter Schulenberg



Rammstein



**ПЕРВАЯ ЛЕННА**

**25**



**SCUMESK + КОЛЛЕГИ**





Since 2006, Eventim has owned Russian ticketing operator parter.ru, which Ratnikov says is advantageous. "The combination of a promoting and ticketing service is much stronger as we can increase the amount of tickets sold and move to venues with Eventim ticketing."

While TCI has come a long way in the last quarter of a century, its boss believes the Russian government could do a lot more to bolster the live music market by building a better transport network and purpose-built venues throughout the country.

He says, "The improvement of the entire Russian market depends on the strategy of our country's leaders but I am afraid the current strategy is to not let our country develop rapidly and properly.

"Russia is the biggest and one of the richest countries in the world and could be such as strong touring market, but our current leaders are focused only on oligarchs.

"However, during the past decade we have seen improvements to infrastructure, with new airports, highways, recognisable hotel chains, world-standard arenas and stadiums opening. But the income of people in many parts of the

## Not on Lemmy's bucket list

Ed Ratnikov will never forget working on Motorhead's first Russian tour, in October 1996.

He had hired a Russian military cargo plane, with a passenger compartment for the band and crew, to transport them and the backline to a show in Rostov.

The aircraft's departure from a military airfield in the suburbs of Moscow was delayed for two hours due to the arrival of the commander general of the Russian Air Force.

"Lemmy was furious, in one hand he had a strong Dutch beer and in the other a bottle of Jack Daniels, he was swearing like hell," says Ratnikov. "When he found out that the WC on board consisted of a bucket, he refused to fly.

"The band then chose to fly on a regular airline, but Lemmy had left his passport on the military plane, so at the airport, I had to persuade the airline rep to let him fly.

"I gave the rep some swag, our tour jacket and CDs, and he agreed to help but then we came to passport control. I showed them a CD with a picture of the band and their names underneath. They looked at the CD and then at Lemmy and start laughing... but they let us through.

That was Russia in the '90s."



Ed Ratnikov and Lemmy with Samantha Fox, also performing in Russia at the time

country is still not sufficient to enable us to often work there."

In the immediate future, the key priorities for the TCI team include a show by Iron Maiden at the VTB Arena (33,000) in Moscow in July and a stadium tour by Rammstein next year.

"TCI is stronger than ever. We have great people in the team who are dedicated to developing the business, continuing to entertain fans and increase ticket sales," says Ratnikov.

Tele-Club's Galperin has no doubts that TCI has had a huge impact on the development of the Russian touring market and will continue to do so.

He says, "TCI has established many Russian cities on the world touring map, shown that it's possible to bring major Western acts even into Urals, Siberia and the far east of the country, and brought lots of incredible bands and lots of joy to astonished fans who didn't believe it possible." ■

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