Listening to alternative histories through independent sound media in Ukraine

by **Ieva Gudaitytė**

abstract

This essay, based on broader research on independent radio stations from Kyiv, Gasoline Radio and 20ft Radio, and an independent label, Shukai, looks at how these sound media can engage with cultural history and offer different ways to think about archiving. Through applying Diana Taylor's use of repertoire to three specific sound examples (a radio show, an installation, and a record), I argue that these alternative sound media formats allow an open and dynamic reading of cultural works of the past. The role practitioners seem to take up is to look for and fill gaps they see in mainstream public discourse in relation to Ukrainian music, culture, and sound media history. Listening for the missing knowledge from the past allows the audience to attune it with imaginations of the future.

KEYWORDS: Sound media, archive, independent radio, cultural memory.

History, and who gets to tell it, plays an important role in Russia's war and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In times when historical truths seem to be easily manipulated and weaponized, any attempt to look for "alternative" histories should be taken with serious caution. To clarify, here, I mean two things: first, the history of Ukrainian alternative culture, and second, a hope of finding answers for how things can be different in the future by looking at less-explored pasts.

The history of radio in Ukraine and elsewhere is embedded with notions of nostalgia and authenticity, together with radio technology's colonial and emancipatory potential.[1] From early radiotelegraphy during the Ukrainian People's Republic, the first broadcasts from Kharkiv, and the rapid increase of Soviet state control and violence that followed (including strict monitoring and destruction of documents from Ukrainian radio archives), public radio in the 20th century has been a site of both control and resistance.[2] The latter includes various community practices attempting to overcome official state policies, such as amateur short-wave radio clubs, illegal gatherings to listen to jammed radio broadcasts from the West, or initiatives by public radio workers to save local recordings.[3] The early years of Ukrainian independence brought new negotiations around what is independent in radio media: liberalization of the market and the first commercial radio stations, mass entertainment culture, and the role of the music journalist as taste curator.[4] Not long after, media freedom was threatened during the Kremlin-backed terms of the Kuchma government (1994–2004), whose media monopolization, disinformation campaigns, and the assassination of journalist Georgiy Gongadze contributed to triggering the Orange Revolution in 2004; and, similarly, during the Yanukovych administration (2010–2013) that was overthrown by the "Revolution of Dignity", also known as the Maidan Revolution, in 2013.[5] Due to the lack of coverage from the mainstream media during the Maidan events, various online media and grassroots initiatives like *Hromadske.tv* and *Hromadske Radio* (*Hromadske* meaning public in Ukrainian) became key public channels for independent journalism and news coverage.[6] The declaration of martial law since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, allowed for increased government control over the public media in Ukraine.[7] While social media remains the most trusted information provider since before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian-language radio broadcasting has increased in popularity.[8] Other audio media, such as narrative podcasts, have also emerged as formats to communicate new wartime realities and frontline experiences.[9]

This essay looks at three examples of "other" audio formats

20ft Radio's name refers to their studio space, established in 2016 in a twenty-foot-long cargo container. PHOTO: 20FT RADIO/FACEBOOK

that engage with Ukrainian media and cultural history. They differ in their form and content: an online radio show on Ukrainian poetry, a radio show and an installation made from old Ukrainian National Radio recordings, and a record of re-released archival music from Odesa Film Studios. Contextualizing them with interview materials from their authors and peers offers an insight into broader conversations around cultural memory in the contemporary Kyivan alternative culture scene. Through this kaleidoscopic approach, I ask why it is important for independent sound media practitioners to engage with cultural works of the past and which ones, and how it can act as a kind of ad-hoc archive in times of war. Independent sound media, as discussed here, pose a playful provocation: to what both sound media and archive can be.

Research context

All interview materials used in this work are from ongoing research on the independent sound media in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Here, I focus on parts of conversations that relate to Ukrainian cultural history, collective memory or the idea of an archive. These include direct quotes from interviews with hosts and core team members of two Kyiv-based online radio stations, Gasoline Radio and 20ft Radio, and a co-founder of an independent record label, Shukai, Ukrainian for the imperative form for "[you go and] search". Four of these were conducted remotely online with people residing in Kyiv: from Gasoline, co-founder and curator Oleksii Makarenko and Sasha Ushenko, a studio manager, event organizer, and host of the poetry radio show

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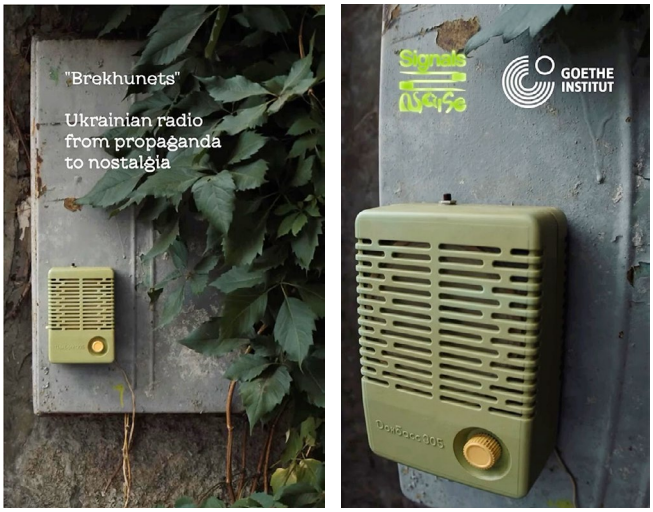
example, core team members from 20ft Radio, from Shukai, co-founder Sasha Tsapenko (who was also an occasional show host on Gasoline Radio). Another four were carried out in-person in Vilnius and Berlin: from Gasoline Radio, Olha Udda, a DJ and a cultural manager, who supported radio activities remotely, Mykola, a musician and host of a radio show before moving to Berlin, and Andrii Bezliydnyi (aka Andrew Bez), a former host of the show "Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine"; from 20ft Radio, Vitalii, now based in the Netherlands and working more as an international representative of 20ft's activities. All the interviews were semi-structured, with a soft focus on the role of independent media and alternative sound culture communities since the full-scale invasion. Each took one and a half to two hours. Apart from one, all were recorded. Interviews were held initially in English and gradually more in mixed English and Ukrainian (questions in English, responses in Ukrainian). While not included through direct quotations, broader research included follow-up interviews and informal written and verbal communication with interviewees.

Due to limitations imposed on this research by the ongoing war, this work used a so-called patchwork ethnography approach. This research method combines various fragmentary data over a long period to understand the context and subject matter beyond the division between the researcher's point of entry, i.e. "home", and the site of research, i.e. "field". Instead, it embraces working with "gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge



The radio festival "Signals2Noise" in Berlin. PHOTO: GASOLINE RECORDS

production".[10] War is one of those situations where constraints become tangible due to martial law, mobilization, and other factors. Hence, patchwork offers a framework to access the field – Ukrainian independent sound media online and studio sites – remotely through online interviews and accompanying contextual documentation.

For this essay, this includes the sound works mentioned earlier (the radio show, the record, the installation) and accompanying materials available from their producers' websites, such as videos, written descriptions, and stations and hosts' public social media posts. I also refer to online radio archives as a site to store and communicate audio content and as a source for contextualizing individual shows within broader programming. Finally, through my curatorial work supporting the radio festival "Signals2Noise" in Berlin in October 2024, I had an opportunity to observe Gasoline Radio representatives remaking the radio show with Ukrainian National Radio excerpts into an audio-visual installation.[11] All of this allows the researcher to examine how cultural history and memory are explored at the intersections between the sound work, its medium, and its verbal contextualization.

While this text does not include much discussion about how independent sound media functions on the ground in Kyiv, I would like to briefly introduce the *Gasoline* and *20ft radio* studio locations over the years. This is done for two purposes. First, to prevent reducing their work to online activity, instead seeing it as interconnected with their offline presence. Second, to show that the radio studio is in close physical and social proximity to other important nightlife cultural venues and serves as a meeting space for local audiences and creators. Having that in mind allows us to see interviews, sound works, and online audiovisual materials as fragments of larger discussions about memory and alternative history within a closely connected local alternative music community.

Gasoline Radio, a Kyiv-based online radio, officially launched on February 22, 2022, two days before the full-scale invasion, but practically started operating on May 18 of the same year. Until August 2023, Gasoline rented a studio on Brats'ka Street in the Podil district of Kyiv, where radio hosts could stream live or prerecorded shows. Due to financial and human resources constraints – as a part of the core team joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces – in autumn 2023 the radio shifted away from live-streamed radio shows, moving instead towards streaming prerecorded shows sent by hosts through their platforms online, organizing occasional events (like DJ sets) in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other cities in Ukraine, and participating in collaborations with other radios or cultural institutions.

20ft Radio's name refers to their studio space, established in 2016 in a twenty-foot-long cargo container. Until autumn 2021, 20ft Radio broadcasted next to one of Kyiv's most popular Kyivan underground clubs, Closer, in what was, until the early 2010s, a weaving factory.[12] After a period of online and event-hosting activity, including the first year of the full-scale invasion, the radio opened its container to live audiences again in the summer of 2023 at another location in the Podil district: this time in the yard of a former beer factory in Kyrylivska Street. Next door, in the building that the 20ft Radio yard is a part of, is the nightclub, cultural venue and community café K41 (which stands for the address, Kyrylivska 41; alternative name ∄) that is in close collaboration and shared social circles with 20ft Radio.

The record label Shukai does not have a studio location. It also differs from the radio stations in being sound media, which I use here to refer more to the vinyl and online records that the label distributes. The reason to include it is, firstly, thematic – its focus on releasing recordings of Ukrainian avant-garde music from the 1960s and 1990s and its production process that includes broader archival and restoration work. Secondly, Shukai shares other commonalities with Kyivan independent radio stations: social circles, performances in similar venues and events, interest in discovering and sharing alternative Ukrainian music, and exploring experimental sounds and sonic formats.

Independent sound media

I call this sound media "independent", although it is often interchangeable with "community" or "alternative". This choice aims to highlight differences from mainstream commercial media or public culture and media institutions. Both radio stations and the label see themselves as places for sounds that could not fit elsewhere: the eclectic, playful, niche, and experimental. According to Gasoline Radio hosts, their goal was to diversify the local music scene by offering a space for new or less established musicians and radio DJs. Similarly, 20ft Radio co-founders speak of a place where musicians without label contracts or other sources of stable income "could play what they want" without commercial interruptions or public media regulations.[13]

Financially, it means the stations and the label are independent of commercial donors or institutional commitments to the state. Funding is thus diversified between listener donations, events revenue, and various short-time projects with European funding structures. Both stations operate on a volunteer-based

and amateur, or semi-professional, level where no prior experience is required. Instead, a radio station is seen as a training facility and a platform for international collaborations. Similarly to other self-organized entities, working roles within radio stations are flexible, and relationships are often personal and intertwined. While audience reception is not analyzed in detail here, one of the self-identifiers of stations like Gasoline and 20ft is the social proximity to its listenership.

Changing the roles of creators and audiences is characteristic of alternative media.[14] Their focus on entertainment and artistic pluralism echoes pirate radio practices, while their commitment to remain outside of financial or other dependence on the state can find comparison within the free radio movement.[15] Self-identifying as independent can apply to aesthetics through ideas of authenticity and taste value judgements, but it also maintains an ambition for social transformation that Michael Warner has described as counter-public discourse.[16] This places Gasoline and 20ft radios (and to some extent Shukai) alongside other DIY community radio situations that engage with sound technology as a way for civic empowerment, as, for instance, Christina Dunbar-Hester observes in low-frequency radio activism in the U.S.[17]

"CHANGING THE ROLES OF CREATORS AND AUDIENCES IS CHARACTERISTIC OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA."

War creates urgency. It makes abstract notions of cultural independence align with more concrete political objectives. In her article reflecting on how Russian political and military aggression has affected ethnographers and ethnographic work in Ukraine since the beginning of the war in 2014, Jennifer J. Carroll remembers a conference in Kharkiv in 2016, observing other participants:

> **[...] undertak[ing] projects of social prognostication, projecting a more desirable, more democratic, more optimistic vision onto an imagined Ukraine that exists beyond the present, the revolution, and the war.**[18]

What J. Caroll describes is yet another side of being independent – from the past and present political contexts that affect the work of ethnographers she observed. Independent sound media reveal a similar paradox: an urge to focus on imagining alternative Ukrainian culture after the war yet returning to exploring its tragic history.

Alternative archive

War and the full-scale invasion also added urgency to cultural preservation efforts, including the sonic.[19] It also made documentation a significant tool for making sense out of war experience and seeking justice: from war crimes evidence to diaries of civilian experiences.[20] As it picked up its activities few months after the full-scale invasion, the independent radio stream has also become a collage of moods, reactions, and reflections of the Kyivan cultural community. Coming from a tightly knit circle of friends and colleagues, permeated by the feeling of isolation imposed by restricted mobility under martial law, especially for men, broadcasting became an outlet and a tool to distribute sounds across space but also time. Olha Udda, a Gasoline radio host, underlines the almost existential function of broadcasting in a situation when all can be lost at any moment:

> **People [in the alternative music community] are aware that we were experiencing a unique time of having a chance to continue our creative work during the first two years of full-scale war, but there is an awareness that every opportunity to create is fragile.**[21]

Referring to constant shelling, internal and international displacement, mobilization, electricity outages, and financial difficulties that the invasion has caused, Olha speaks of the desire "not to be forgotten": as civilians who continue their creative practice by producing radio shows while also witnessing and being targeted by the military aggression. One of the ways to resist the sense of fragility was to share and store their work in radio archives. All radio shows and music playlists are available on their websites via embedded links to platforms such as SoundCloud (Gasoline Radio) and MixCloud (20ft Radio) that are free for listeners and producers.[22] Shukai uses the online record store Bandcamp, which provides an alternative to mainstream streaming sites with a supposed fairer treatment of artists.[23] It also allows a limited number of free listen for its audiences. As one of the co-founders of 20ft Radio explained, providing access to all shows was a crucial part of the initial radio vision, because the archive allowed them to spread alternative Ukrainian music that according to him, was otherwise hard to find.[24]

To understand how radio works as a collection of cultural works, I propose to look at it through what Diana Taylor calls a repertoire. Based on her study of performance art in the Americas, Taylor calls for an alternative to an object-centric archive by looking at cultural actions that "enact an embodied memory" both due to their personal significance to an individual, and by targeting socially constructed collective reception.[25] The author outlines various ways archive and repertoire work together and argues against the myth of stable and unmanipulated knowledge of an archive. Repertoire acts, through this perspective, require participation for knowledge to be transferred, and embrace their change over time. To listen to independent sound media as an archive but also as a repertoire means to allow it continually "generate, record, and transmit" knowledge about alternative Ukrainian culture in the past and present.[26] Sound works in the independent media repertoire become a way of reinterpreting historical aural traditions and contemporary sound documents that might hold something to explain the ongoing terror, and sonic reminders to prevent it from happening again. They allow for what Olesya Khromeychuk has called "placing Ukraine on our mental maps" – a way to fill the gap of knowledge and add

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Olena Teliha (1906–1942), controversial for her involvement with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

complexity to the understanding of how communities across Ukrainian society are responding to Russia's full-scale invasion, or what led to it.[27] A repertoire approach also allows us to see radio hosts engagement with the past by pointing out the gap where they think history of alternative Ukrainian music culture should be.

Vyriy [Whirlwind]

The first sound work example I introduce works more as an archive than a repertoire. It is one of the first Gasoline shows, *Vyriy* [Whirlwind], which engages with more common traditional notions of "historical heritage" of Ukrainian literature and poetry. "A musical and poetic podcast by Borys Tkachuk [...] and Sasha Ushenko", *Vyriy* mixed local ambient tracks with readings of classic and contemporary Ukrainian poets: Vasyl Stus (1938 – 1985), Lina Kostenko (b. 1930), Vasyl Symonenko (1935 – 1963), Maria Stepaniuk (contemporary), Nadiia Savytska (contemporary), and Olena Teliha (1906 – 1942), controversial for her involvement with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).[28] Among them, Stus, Kostenko and Symonenko are members of *shestidesiatniki*, [The Sixtiers] – a post-Stalin Thaw period cultural movement across the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, they promoted national ideas, language, citizenship, and creative freedom.[29] Maria Stepanyuk and Nadiia Savytska are contemporary poets while Olena Teliha, born in 1906, is an earlier representative of the Ukrainian national movement against the Russian Empire before the Second World War.

First in the series, Teliha is a deeply contentious figure in contemporary Ukrainian memory politics. While admired as a national hero, some scholars condemn her literary affiliations to "the authoritarian brand of nationalism" and treat her as a part of the group within the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists most associated with integral nationalism.[30] After rejecting the "writing that glorified Hitler", she was denounced by the Gestapo and, together with her husband, executed in 1942.[31] While I cannot be certain, I doubt these discussions were analyzed in depth by the makers of the radio show. For them, Teliha is a lesser-known Ukrainian female poet that deserves more space for her work and perhaps more attention to her biography. It suggests an alternative music community discovering, or wanting to discover, Ukrainian literary history on their own.

In the show, Teliha is portrayed as an activist for Ukrainian independence. Her execution by the Gestapo and her commitment to writing in Ukrainian fit the overarching theme to represent the history of Ukrainian literature under constant repression. Stus, perhaps one the most popular Ukrainian dissident poets today, died after experiencing various forms of violence and declaring a hunger strike in the Soviet forced labor camp in Perm. Symonenko died shortly after being beaten up by Soviet police at Smila railway station.[32] The episodes are all in Ukrainian and are accompanied by English and Ukrainian descriptions on the Gasoline website. These short texts give basic biographical data for each author and include selected quotes from poets, such as "Victory is given only to those who were able to laugh even in pain" by Olena Teliha or "We want to show that Ukrainian poetry is an important component of our culture, permeated with pain and oppression" by Vasyl Stus.[33] This suggests a wish to "reinstate" them to an archive as a place of stable value and recognition. Yet the focus on their tragic biographical data hints more towards an attempt to evoke the collective trauma of cultural oppression. In their interview descriptions of the show, the Gasoline hosts also bring up the story of "Budynok Slovo" [Building Word; also known as The Writers' Building], a residential building in Kharkiv that housed many prominent Ukrainian writers in the early 1930s, most of whom were executed by the Soviet authorities and thus are considered part of the "Executed

Renaissance."[34] Bringing them together aims to add repertoire to the archive: evoking anger and a sense of injustice inflicted on Ukrainian authors. It also is a way for the radio practitioners to answer the question of why Ukrainian literary works are not widely known.

The radio makers also seemed to be interested in the complexity of human choices in the face of "pain and oppression", and a way to relate to previous Ukrainian artistic traditions. The podcast *Vyriy* can be seen as a search for historical consolation, similar to what Marianne Hirsch calls a generation of post-memory: a way to deal with second-hand or transgenerational trauma: In this case, of facing the existential cultural threat imposed previously by Soviet repression and now by Russian military aggression.[35] In the words of the show's host Sasha:

> **It's hard to say why it feels this way because we Ukrainians have been under pressure and there is so much pain – it is reflected in the songs and what Ukrainians are experiencing these days.**[36]

This quote calls for advice from the poets of the past. Poems became carriers of knowledge from previous to contemporary creative communities. *Vyriy* also reveals a moment of realization: since the full-scale invasion, the topics of Ukrainian cultural works can be understood through the lens of survival in a way that might not have been possible before.

In another interview, a host from 20ft Radio referred to a similar moment of need for more attention to Ukrainian cultural history. Referring to one of the canonical figures in Ukrainian national and literary tradition, Taras Shevchenko, he shared that while it all seemed outdated at the time, "now it makes sense to me why we had to read Shevchenko in school, because my classmates on the front lines, they now know what they are fighting for", meaning that reading Schevchenko allows people to see the war as a part of a longer history of Russian imperial ambitions in Ukraine. Moments like this and *Vyriy* suggest changing attitudes towards cultural history and its place in an archival institution amongst radio communities. What was once dismissed as belonging to the past and no longer relevant gains contemporary political significance. Bringing that out through radio formats is seen as bringing it back to life, back to the actively performed repertoire.

"OLD RECORDINGS OF UKRAINIAN NATIONAL RADIO BROADCASTS FROM THE 1990S ARE JUXTAPOSED WITH VARIOUS CONTEMPORARY TRACKS."

Similar sentiments echo across other testimonies, referring to the need to learn about the history of Ukraine, the Romanov empire and the Soviet Union, including the injustices of serfdom and language bans during Tsarist rule, Stalin's policy-induced famine, the Holodomor, or mass civilian deportations to Siberia.[37] The motivation is to use independent sound media to build resilience against the Kremlin's weaponized readings of history. In other words, the full-scale invasion was a call to revise the perception of history and its importance, making it less about alternative history and more about an alternative reading of that history. It is a way to reconstitute cultural history in a way it is easily transmitted to the new generation of cultural workers in Ukraine.

Vsesvitniia Sluzhba Radio Ukraiini [The Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine]

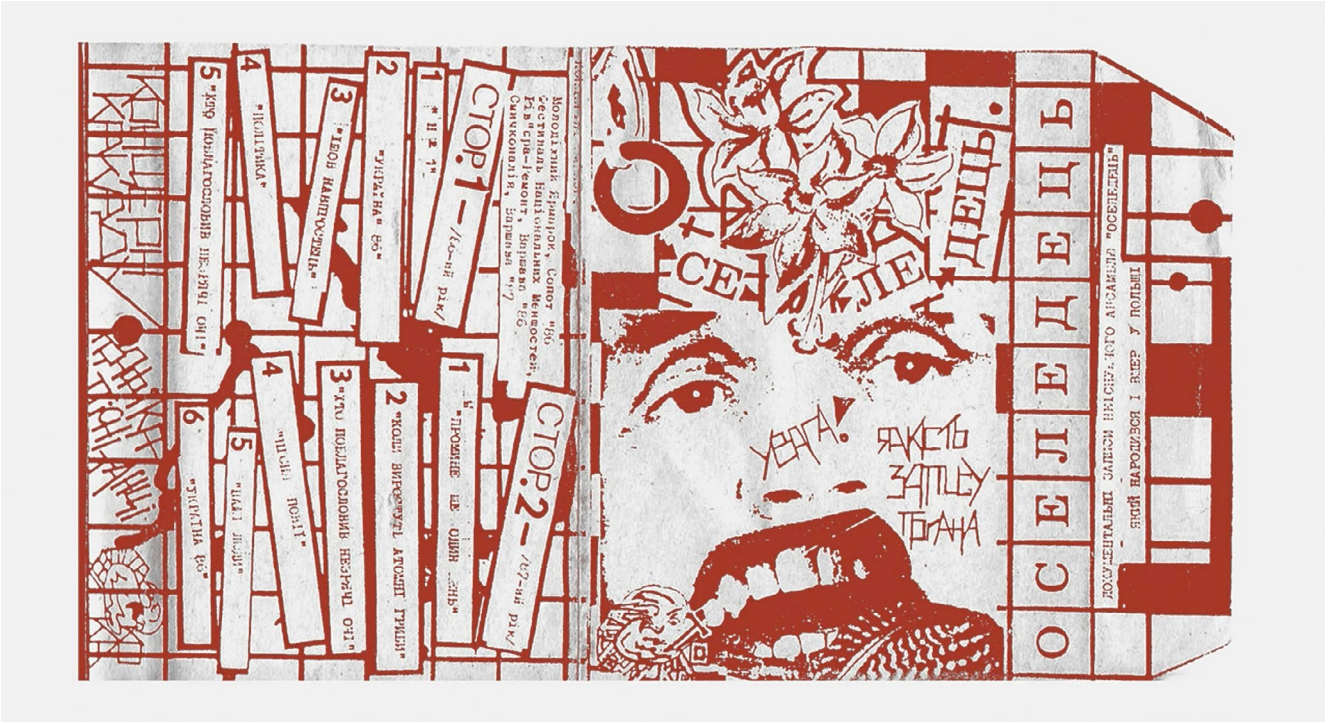
The show *Vsesvitniia Sluzhba Radio Ukraini* [The Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine] by Gasoline Radio is another example. Here, the archive works with the repertoire to connect the history of radio to the present. Each episode lasts about one hour, where old recordings of Ukrainian national radio broadcasts from the 1990s are juxtaposed with various contemporary tracks to create an illusion that the service is active today. The show aims "to reimagine this Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine as if it was still going". As the program description reads:

> **[...] this is not only created to entertain you with cool tunes. But first of all – to create an imaginary space and time in which the old Ukrainian radio continues to be old and at the same time relevant for all categories of citizens.**[38]

To be old and relevant, firstly, refers to aesthetics and music taste. The radio show combines sonic markers of an "old radio" – historic jingles, background crackles and excerpts from news segments – with music that listeners today are assumed to enjoy. Secondly, the show's relevance to all citizens questions a somewhat outdated function of radio: to provide all information and entertainment. The show intends to turn fragments of Ukrainian media history into something that contemporary independent sound media listeners can relate to and thus reanimate archival materials in a contemporary context.

During the radio festival "Signals-2Noise" in Berlin in October 2024, the show's host Andrii turned the series into an installation titled *Brekhunets: From Propaganda to Nostalgia*.[39] *Brekhunets* – chatterbox, stemming from the word 'brekhun', meaning 'liar' – is the Ukrainian version of radio technology also known as radio *tochka* [Russian for point], a small wired radio receiver compulsory in various institutions and people's homes across the Soviet Union that was used as a mass propaganda tool during the Stalin era.[40] For the festival, three such radio receivers were reconstructed to play custom-made episodes of the Worldwide Service of Radio Ukraine. Extra meaning was added by using one of the devices manufactured in the now semi-occupied region of Donbas, thus emphasizing that it belongs to Ukraine (see images).

The installation referred to radio history on several levels. First, by alluding to "propaganda", it referred to radio's impe-



Koka Records released niche Ukrainian recordings in Poland just around the fall of the Soviet Union. PHOTO: KOKA RECORDS

rial past. Evoking how radio technology was used to impose an overarching Soviet identity on its citizens bears comparison to the history of the British Colonial office or French national broadcasting attempts to exert symbolic power over their colonies.[41] Second, the nostalgia dimension supports the repertoire approach to thinking about memory and its transfer depends on individual and personal reception. It can imply the listener will be nostalgic for independent Ukrainian broadcasting services. It also taps into the complicated politics of how nostalgia for Soviet times is both ironized and weaponized in the public discourse.[42] Combining these discrepancies – Soviet technology from Donbas broadcasting independent Ukrainian radio archive materials and contemporary music in a festival in Berlin during the ongoing war in Ukraine – allows space for playful and open-ended readings of media archive and history.

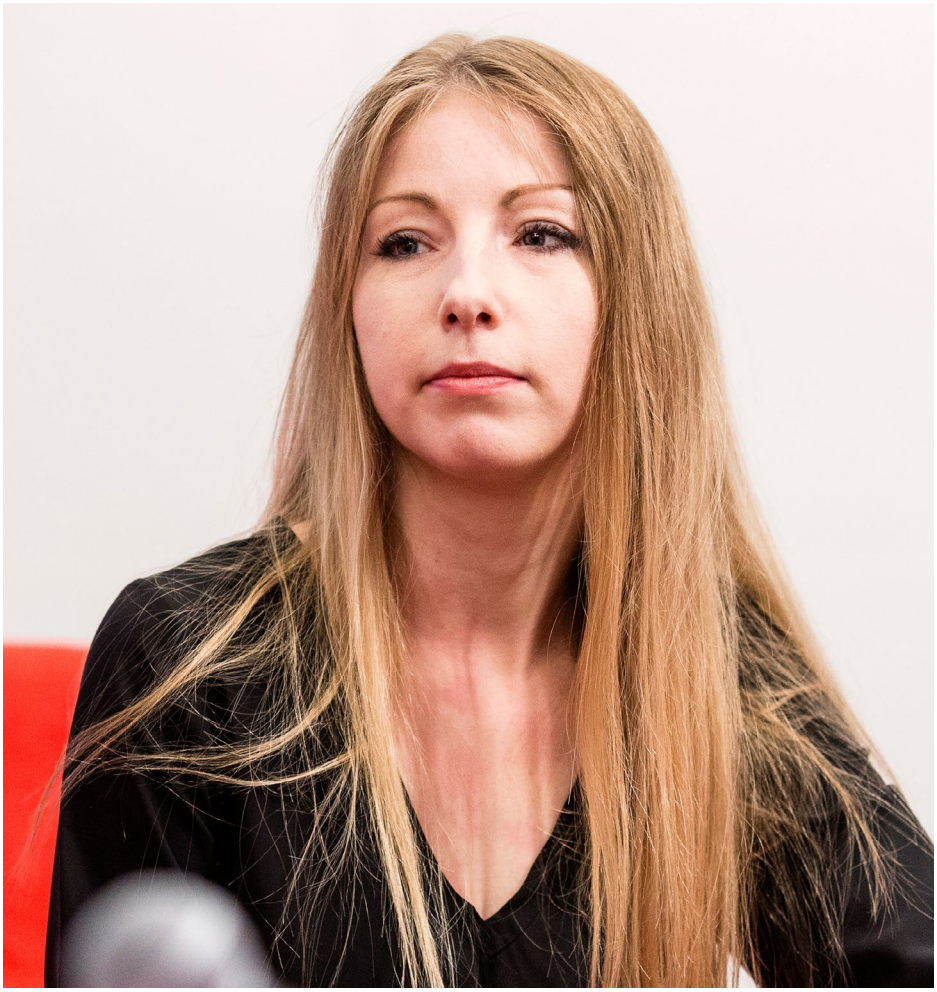
Contextual information around the installation focuses on personal memories forcibly turned political. As Andrii, the show's host, describes, Ukrainian national radio was present in every home, most commonly in the kitchen, and and was full of naïve content:

> **[…] congratulatory broadcasts, meetings with new pop artists, talk shows on any topic, from discussion of the primary school curriculum to the modern policy of reforms and rethinking of the historical past. All these programs accompanied the everyday life of people in cities and villages and the carefree childhood of today's youth, who today are faced with the challenges of survival.**[43]

Memories of the kitchen, childhood, and other elements of the peaceful domestic past highlight the contrast with the uncertain and traumatizing reality of war. To call it nostalgia would be to undervalue it. Instead, it can be seen as another example of evoking embodied memory to think about the trauma of forced displacement, and an attempt to add complexity to historical events for international audiences.

"THEY WERE SINGING ABOUT BURNING CHURCHES AND THE CHURCHES ARE BURNING NOW."

By introducing what is deemed rather specific for Ukrainian cultural history, *brekhunets* bridged it with widely accessible sentiments. Placing an old Ukrainian radio in the world also tapped into global politics, as listeners were invited to use real-time translation for the spoken segments of the Ukrainian Radio recordings. The exhibition text suggested noting "the symbolism in historical facts from the news" as a reminder of narratives about nuclear armament, international commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity etc. that gained new valence since the full-scale invasion. The installation turned historical radio broadcasts into a sonic space that is politically haunting in its content yet comforting in its domestic aesthetics. In this space, Ukrainian radio history is enacted as a repertoire



Victoria Amelina, Ukrainian novelist and war crimes researcher, killed by a Russian attack on civilian infrastructure in June 2023. PHOTO: RAFAŁ KOMOROWSKI/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

to help understand political events of today and vice versa – by appealing to contemporary audiences, archival sound objects regain relevance.

Shukai and the 1990s

The final example is of independent sound media engaging with the history of alternative culture in the late Soviet and early independence periods. The economic hardships, a surge of enthusiasm around the newly independent state, and the emergence of music previously censored by the Soviets contributed to a unique moment for the alternative music scene to look for new ways to define its Ukrainian-ness.[44] Rediscovering the new wave, avant-garde, and post-punk artists continues to this day. For example, one of my interviewees invokes the importance of Koka Records (the title being a humorous acronym for *Kontsern Kakadu* [Concern Cockatoo]), which released niche Ukrainian recordings in Poland just around the fall of the Soviet Union.[45] He specifically refers to a song from 1985 by *Oseledets* [herring] released by Koka, called *Tserkvy Horiat*, [Churches are Burning].[46] In his words, the darkness of that sound echoes particularly well today: "they were singing about burning churches and the churches are burning now".[47] Perhaps unknowingly, this echoes an essay by a Ukrainian novelist and war crimes researcher Victoria Amelina, killed by a Russian attack on civilian infrastructure in June 2023:

> **Cancel culture vs. execute culture: Why Russian manuscripts don't burn, but Ukrainian manuscripts burn all too well.**[48]

At the same time, some of the interest in the 1990s is seen as too mainstream for other members of the Kyivan alternative music scene. As Gasoline radio host and musician Mykola describes, the increased interest is far from discovering all the depths of the period, and overlooks later years of the scene:

> **Another thing about the Ukrainian music scene is that we have a big gap between the 1990s and nowadays. In the 90s, as everywhere in the post-Soviet shit, there was a big boom in any kind of music, especially experimental forms. And Kyivan and the Ukrainian experimental scenes were actually very huge as is starting to be emerge. There is a lot more than people may know. […]. Most people, not even mainstream people, but musicians, they know Svetlana Nianio. She's the most prominent of that era, but there is much more. […] And it's a very interesting point about archive-making and history. For me, it was a big surprise to listen to music from the 90s from Ukraine. […] Now, it's more like cultural resurrection or something like that.**[49]

In highlighting "the boom" that the newly open global public and commercial space caused in the 1990s, Mykola stresses the scope of a gap in alternative cultural memory. Then comes the surprise that more music survived from the years of supposed "underground" or cultural practices hidden from the state than expected. This reveals oversights of institutional archives, e.g. private collections that the contemporary independent scene hopes to fill. All this is underscored by a strong desire to discover

something deemed new, authentic, and unheard, and an urgency to save the "dying resource".

This issue is addressed by another alternative music initiative: a label focusing on Ukrainian music from the 1960s to 1990s, Shukai, part of the independent label Muscut.[50] As one of its founders, Sasha Tsapenko, has described, it all started with a visit to the Soviet Ukrainian film studio in Odesa, where he discovered sci-fi and horror TV film scores by Victor Vlasov. Comparing the former film institution to the BBC Radiophonic studio, and the discovered tapes to Delia Derbyshire's "Doctor Who" main theme, he describes the state of the archive as appalling, and the process of restoration as borderline absurd:

> **It was hard to take [the recordings] out of the studio, because the tape machines in the studio were in very bad shape. They were cutting the tapes, and I thought that we needed to bring these tapes to Kyiv, digitize and restore them. There is a cool story: the studio didn't want to give them to us, so we made an agreement with them. They gave us an insurance that said if we lose these tapes, then we have to pay them 5 million hryvnias. And I asked for these tapes to be sent to Kyiv with DHL. But when DHL saw the sum of 5 million, they refused to take them to Kyiv, so I had to drive them – 5 million, we laughed that if the tapes cost 5 million, then I took 5 million and just went to Kyiv. When we brought them to Kyiv, we restored them a little, because they were torn. We glued them. And when we listened, I was very impressed. This is our first release, from the film 'The Air Seller'. And there were a lot of tracks that didn't fit into the movie at all because they were so free that the Soviet government said, we can't put them in the movie.**[51]

The response to the state institutions' failure to preserve archival material resembles working practices of the former Soviet cultural infrastructure.[52] As then, music enthusiasts use humor and unconventional methods to get around the difficulties that prevent them from accessing a desired cultural object. This supports the claim that an unchanging archive, in this case of analogue sound media, is a myth. It also adds specific cultural context to who gets to access it and under what circumstances.

These tapes became the first record from Shukai, *Air-Seller, 1967*. Vlasov's music, written for the television film of the same name, was targeted for all-Soviet audience, hence all its song lyrics are in Russian. This caused some initial backlash for the label upon its release in 2019, as its audience pointed out the discrepancy between this and its commitment to lesser-known Ukrainian sounds. This reaction can be seen as symptomatic of wider debates on how to situate Soviet Ukrainian cultural heritage today.[53] As seen in the quote, the redeeming quality became the soundtrack's initial rejection by the Soviet government and, I would add, similarity to the Western experimental music tradition of that time.

An abandoned archive is an inaccessible site that is not transmitting any knowledge or cultural history. It raises the question of what has happened to other cultural memories that have not been saved for political or other reasons. While these examples speak of disappointment with the archival institution and with the lack of genuine curiosity from the general audience, they also describe the desire, if not ambition, that motivates the work for an alternative collective view of the Ukrainian (alternative) sound history, and, by extension, cultural policy. Cultural works from the period between the 1960s and the 2000s constitute an important part of the independent sound media repertoire: they are seen as predecessors and examples of a nearly forgotten alternative music history that can serve as an inspiration.

Conclusions

Alternative sound media reveal an array of dynamic and playful formats to engage with cultural works of the past. The selected examples do not give an exhaustive overview of cultural memory projects from Gasoline Radio, 20ft Radio, and Shukai. A few other instances where archive and repertoire work together to bring alternative ways to look at the history of Ukrainian culture include Gasoline's documentary film on Carpathian folk music and instrument making traditions, "Spadok" [heritage], and a project between 20ft Radio and the British Council on the 1990s avant-garde scene, "Memory Leaks".[54] They add to the eclectic selection of radiophonic and sound works of poetry, recontextualized archival radio recordings, or restored analogue tapes discussed in this essay. As forms of sound media, both radio stations and the label come across as accessible and agile practices, which allow them to quickly respond to the urgency to preserve memory amidst the new realities of the full-scale invasion.

The sound works and their makers discussed in this essay search for and aim to fill the gaps in alternative Ukrainian cultural memory. They look to the past to find ways to show how cultural knowledge could be useful today. The objects they engage with are not always outside the traditional canon, yet what makes them alternative is their rediscovered and recontextualized value and political significance in the face of military violence. 'Alternative' is also an alternative reading of cultural politics: exported to less informed audiences, it enables them to fill knowledge gaps, adding complexity to Ukrainian experience.

In their attempts at preserving what they deem to be lesser-known cultural work, independent radio and sound practices move away from an object-centric archive to a more action-focused repertoire method of transferring memory. However, the urge to go and search, to share what is discovered, and to foster space for diverse conversations around the shared cultural past are less systematic and more exploratory. Alternative radio communities participate in memory collection not only because they deliberately want to get involved in how history is being told, but also because memory leaks, as an emotion, as if from wounds. The hope is that listening to them can also help make it possible to imagine a future.

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