



UDC 78.034.6:316.7(477)"1980/1990"
DOI: 10.63009/noac/2.2025.21

Article's History: Received: 29.07.2025 Revised: 10.11.2025
Accepted 22.12.2025 Published: 29.12.2025

Olena Sierova*

PhD in Art Studies, Associate Professor
National Academy of Culture and Arts Management
01015, 9 Lavrska Str., Kyiv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5541-1323>

Alternative rock in Ukraine in the context of DIY practices and subcultural dynamics of the late 20th century

Abstract. The relevance of this research was defined by the lack of comprehensive interdisciplinary studies addressing the aesthetic qualities, subcultural and countercultural dynamics, importance of Do-It-Yourself ethics in the development of autonomous musical infrastructure. The aim of the study was to explore the formation, evolution, and sociocultural functions of Ukrainian alternative rock in the intertemporal period of the 1980s and 1990s. The findings demonstrated that the Ukrainian alternative rock scene functioned as a form of cultural self-organisation operating independently of both state ideology and the emerging commercial music industry. It reflected an aesthetic of resistance, genre hybridity, interdisciplinary collaboration (notably with literature and theatre), and a pursuit of cultural sovereignty. Do-It-Yourself ethics served not only as a practical survival strategy, but also as a means of social identification and political expression. Although mainstream cultural industries offered limited support, the Ukrainian alternative scene of the 1990s fostered an emancipated cultural space that can be interpreted as a manifestation of cultural sovereignty. The study identified local rock clubs, festivals, and independent media as key platforms that facilitated the dissemination of alternative musical practices. It also highlighted the persistence of the underground dimension of Ukrainian alternative rock, which, unlike Western counterparts, was never fully absorbed into mainstream culture. This made the Ukrainian case a distinct example of prolonged cultural autonomy in the post-Soviet space. The article proposed viewing late 20th-century Ukrainian alternative rock as an informal cultural institution that combined protest-driven and creative potential in the context of post-totalitarian transformation. The practical value of the study lies in establishing approaches for analysing the Ukrainian musical underground as a form of countercultural expression and subcultural autonomy

Keywords: Ukrainian rock; subcultural identity; Do-It-Yourself technology; underground music; cultural resistance

Introduction

Alternative rock in Ukraine emerged during the transitional period of the 1980s-1990s as both a musical form and a sociocultural phenomenon, shaped by aesthetics of resistance and elements of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethics. Despite its significance in processes of artistic autonomy and sociocultural transformation, this field remained insufficiently explored within academic discourse. One of the most notable contributions to the study of Ukrainian alternative music was M. Sonevtsky's *et al.* (2023) monograph. The authors provided an interdisciplinary analysis of Kyiv's cultural environment in the 1980s, with particular emphasis on the formation

of informal musical infrastructures (the so-called "tusovka"), the functioning of the underground scene, and its interaction with the Soviet ideological system. Special attention was devoted to the early work of Vopli Vido-pliassova as a representative example of the late-Soviet underground rock. Researchers further highlighted the use of the Ukrainian language, ethnic symbolism, and irony as strategies of cultural resistance and decolonial expression, offering a new perspective on the articulation of national identity through music.

Another significant publication contributing to the understanding of the formation of the alternative rock

Suggest Citation:

Sierova, O. (2025). Alternative rock in Ukraine in the context of DIY practices and subcultural dynamics of the late 20th century. *Notes on Art Criticism*, 25(2), 21-32. doi: 10.63009/noac/2.2025.21.

*Corresponding author



phenomenon in Ukraine was an anthology by O. Yevtushenko (2004). In this work, the author examined the creative output of Ukrainian rock bands from the 1960s to the 1990s and provided an overview of the development of rock music across major Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipro, and Ivano-Frankivsk. The publication was particularly valuable for its historiographical approach, which enabled researchers to trace the diversity of local models of rock development in Ukraine, while also offering a rich corpus of factual material that contributed to the reconstruction of the national rock narrative. Beyond scholarly and journalistic contributions, researcher played a crucial role in popularising and archiving Ukrainian rock culture through radio programmes and the multimedia project “Ukrainian rock: Anthology on YouTube”, which systematically documented the evolution of the national rock movement.

Theoretical foundations for analysing alternative rock through the lens of cultural resistance and self-organisation had been established by G. McKay (1998), who introduced the concept of “DIY culture”, defining it as a Do-It-Yourself ethos of independent and non-commercial practices in art and music. Unlike more straightforwardly cultural forms of resistance, scientist emphasised that DIY culture was distinguished by a strong focus on “actually doing something” in the social and political sphere, whether through producing and distributing an alternative press or organising “one-off spectacular mediagenic stunts”. Also, G. McKay (2023) emphasised DIY not only as practice, but as a form of self-identification within countercultural communities. This framework was highly relevant to the Ukrainian context, where alternative scenes of the 1980s and 1990s evolved outside official institutions through self-recording, zines, festivals, and grassroots networks. In Ukrainian scholarship, DIY culture and alternative rock had been addressed by T. Kovach (2024), who explored the subcultural specificity, locality, and educational potential of these practices. The author’s observations corresponded to the historical development of the Ukrainian alternative scene, which frequently operated without institutional support, relying instead on practices such as self-recording, fanzines, and independent festivals.

In the Ukrainian scholarly discourse on the topic of several studies, which had addressed different aspects of rock and alternative music. Research had contributed to situating Ukrainian rock in relation to its aesthetic orientations, its function as a form of youth protest, and its role as an underground cultural sphere with distinct sociocultural functions. O. Yakhno (2023) traced the development of Ukrainian rock, which provided an important foundation for this study, beginning with the 1980s. Scientist classified Ukrainian rock bands into three aesthetic orientations: “radically traditional”, “lyrical-melodic”, and “avant-garde experimental”. This typology was particularly valuable for contextualising the stylistic

premises of the Ukrainian alternative rock scene. M. Zaluzhnyi (2024) acknowledged the emergence of underground culture as a form of youth protest and self-expression, but addressed it only within the framework of Soviet mass culture in Ukraine, without analysing the artistic practices of the underground. In contrast, S. Ovcharenko (2023), using a systemic and cultural-reconstructive approach, traced the emergence and transformation of youth musical subcultures in both totalitarian and post-totalitarian contexts. The researcher interpreted the Ukrainian underground as a “parallel reality of the art scene under totalitarianism” and a form of “voluntary cultural underground”, further defining it as a polysystemic phenomenon that reflected the reality of protest-oriented cultural production. Taken together, these perspectives provided a necessary scholarly background for understanding the cultural, aesthetic, and political conditions that shaped the rise of Ukrainian alternative rock. So, the aim of research was to examine Ukrainian alternative rock of the 1980s-1990s as a distinct cultural formation. The research addressed several tasks: identifying the sociocultural conditions that fostered the genre’s rise; investigating local music scenes and festivals as centres of subcultural self-organisation in the context of interdisciplinary expression and performative practices; and tracing the influence of DIY culture within this ecosystem.

Materials and Methods

An interdisciplinary approach had been employed in this study, combining historical-cultural, sociocultural, musicological, and sociological methods. Such a comprehensive approach made it possible to examine Ukrainian alternative rock not only as a musical phenomenon, but also as a sociocultural formation that emerged and operated within the transitional dynamics of the 1980s and 1990s. The empirical basis of the study was Ukrainian alternative bands of the 1980s and 1990s – Enei, Vopli Vidoplissova, Braty Hadiukiny, Adem, Kolezkyi Asesor, Rabbota KHO, Sestrychka Vika, Kazma-Kazma, Vsiak Vypadok, Er.Dzhaz, Klub Unylykh Lits, and archival materials from samizdat magazines (fanzines), preserved in personal collections and representing an important channel of subcultural communication. Additional data were obtained from digital resources, for example Slukh (Saltykov, 2022), Kyiv Rock Club (n.d.), Cheremshyna (Kovalskyi, n.d.), Amnesia (Drozd & Sheshuryak, 2021). Historical-cultural and sociocultural methods were applied to reconstruct the dynamics of the alternative scene and to situate it within broader societal transformations. The systemic approach allowed for the conceptualisation of Ukrainian alternative rock as a multi-dimensional phenomenon with its own infrastructure, stylistics, and aesthetics. Genre-stylistic, comparative, and analytical methods were employed for close examination of individual bands, the poetics, stage practices, and interactions with the cultural context.

This article applied a holistic interdisciplinary framework that integrated these approaches, placing particular emphasis on the role of DIY strategies as tools of self-expression and as mechanisms for building independent cultural infrastructures during a time of systemic transformation. Particular attention was devoted to DIY ethics, understood as a key mode of self-organisation and countercultural expression. Its various manifestations, including self-recording, independent publishing (*samizdat*), and visual communication, were explored through methods of media and visual analysis. The qualitative analysis of these materials revealed the internal logic and trajectories of alternative musical culture within its sociocultural and historical context. The research procedure unfolded in several stages: 1) collection and systematisation of empirical materials; 2) contextualisation within the broader historical-cultural environment; 3) analytical processing of audio and textual sources; 4) interpretation of results in terms of musical aesthetics, genre, sociocultural functions, and cultural resistance. Each stage of the analysis was situated within the broader context of DIY practices and subcultural dynamics of the late 20th century, which provided a key interpretative framework for understanding modes of self-organisation, cultural autonomy, and countercultural expression in the Ukrainian alternative rock scene.

Results and Discussion

The emergence of alternative rock in Ukraine during the late 20th century must be viewed in the broader context of global transformations in the sociocultural function of music. As music became a medium for political dissent and youth-led critique, alternative rock crystallised as a form of cultural resistance and identity negotiation. In Ukraine, these dynamics were intensified by the weakening of Soviet ideological control and the search for new cultural expressions in the 1990s. Rather than merely reflecting global trends, the protest-oriented Ukrainian rock scene arose in direct response to the collapse of Soviet cultural hegemony and the vacuum it left behind. Unlike in Western contexts, where alternative rock music developed as an expression of countercultural rebellion, its trajectory in Ukraine followed a different path. Prior to the 1990s, Ukrainian alternative rock did not oppose mainstream entertainment, but rather positioned itself in opposition to the state-controlled cultural apparatus. Up to 1991, it was subject to censorship, ideological scrutiny, and infrastructural exclusion. As M. Yoffe (2024) observed, there were “periods of different attitudes towards rock music in the USSR, ranging from surprised watchfulness to cautious acceptance and attempts to direct and co-opt this new musical fad... to KGB surveillance and persecution”. Despite such repression, rock music functioned as an unofficial, underground practice, bearing a strong countercultural and socially engaged charge. As V. Ovsianikov (2022) noted, “this protest potential reveals urgent social concerns, while the

specifically Western and often aggressive rock sound serves as a supporting element that shapes the listener’s emotional experience”.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Ukrainian rock artists began searching for creative outlets under the guise of VIA (Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles), which provided limited institutional cover. This period also saw the rise of the “big-beat” style, a synthesis of Western genres – rock and roll, doo-wop, rhythm and blues, soul – which, according to D. Kocherzhuk (2023), “served as a precursor to the emergence of new musical currents and directions in Ukrainian pop music”. These stylistic experiments were reflected in the work of groups such as Smerichka, Arnika, Hutsuly, Enei, and Kobza. Linguistic politics also shaped the ideological foundation of Ukrainian alternative rock. From its inception, lyrics occupied a central role, with poetic content often conveying the emotional and conceptual depth of the music. As M. Zaluzhnyi (2024) pointed out, “in the 1960s and 1970s, Ukrainian rock music was characterised by relatively unremarkable accompaniment, but already stood out for its vivid poetic decisions and the depth of its lyrical content”. Despite restrictions, many artists insisted on performing in Ukrainian. One of the most notable examples was the Kyiv-based group Enei, whose Ukrainian-language recordings and televised performances were systematically destroyed in the early 1970s. The desire to preserve language through music became one of the defining elements of the alternative scene. As I. Dovzhynets *et al.* (2023) emphasised, “Ukrainian music is an important element of a unifying cultural heritage”.

By the 1980s, Ukrainian rock underwent substantial stylistic diversification as young audiences gained increased access to Western recordings – often smuggled or brought from Warsaw Pact countries. Copied on home dubbing equipment, these materials circulated widely among amateur rock communities. Despite continued ideological pressure, music with protest themes and a spirit of resistance gained popularity. As V. Kudelia (2023) noted, “responsibility for the development of this direction at that time was assumed by the Komsomol, in particular through the establishment of rock clubs, the organisation of festivals, and active media coverage”. In parallel, greater availability of musical instruments, wider access to music education, and the auditory influence of Western styles facilitated the genre’s practical adoption, so that what had once been a fragmented underground culture was becoming a coordinated alternative scene.

Although global punk culture emerged in the late 1960s, its influence reached Ukraine only by the mid-1980s, due to Soviet isolationism. From this point, the Ukrainian alternative scene gained strength, represented by groups such as Vopli Vidopliassova, Braty Hadiukiny, Skryabin and others. While these bands were recognised as central to Ukraine’s rock canon, at the time it operated on the margins of the mainstream, embodying a distinctly alternative sound. Throughout the 1980s, “Ukrainian

rock moved from underground to legalisation, from flat concerts to full stadiums, from imitating foreign songs to original creativity” (Zaluzhnyi, 2024). By the mid-1980s, many previously underground bands began to enter the public sphere. The changing cultural climate enabled access to new performance venues, such as rock clubs, houses of culture, and officially sanctioned festivals. A notable sign of this transformation was the growing institutional support for large-scale musical events and the increasing media visibility. “The renewed interest in Ukrainian rock was particularly encouraged by the organisation and widespread media coverage of numerous new republican and regional festivals” (Yakhno, 2023). One of the earliest rock festivals in the USSR, Debut-86, took place in 1986 at the Dnipro House of Culture in Kyiv. Organised as an amateur competition, it gave participants access to a professional stage and created opportunities for peer engagement and collective reflection (Kyiv Rock Club, n.d.). The widespread use of Ukrainian in performances was particularly striking during a period of active Russification. Notable Kyiv-based acts included Adem, Kvartyra No.50, Titanik, Tsvirkunove Chyslo, Uksusnyk, TOK, SAD. In the autumn of 1986, Kyiv opened its first official rock club, following similar initiatives in other cities. Based in the Bolshevik Palace of Culture, the club provided rehearsal space, instruments, and professional equipment. Its activity catalysed the emergence of numerous alternative bands such as Slid, Zatoryannyi Mir, Banita Baida, Vavylon, Ivanov Down, Rabbota KHO, Kolezkyi Asesor and others. The creative output of these groups had been described as “difficult to interpret or classify – it evokes a kind of urbanism, depressive and blurred musical configurations, and at the same time a fragmented sonic landscape marked by a unique musical hypnosis and psychedelia” (Ovcharenko, 2023).

Adem, formed in 1983, was among the earliest Ukrainian bands to pursue alternative and heavy metal sounds, often facing institutional resistance and police scrutiny. Despite these challenges, the band won the “Audience favourite” award at Debut-86, affirming its resonance with local audiences. During the second half of the 1980s, Adem became a key figure in Kyiv’s alternative scene, noted for its raw intensity and influential live performances. In the 1990s, the group’s sound evolved to incorporate grunge and funk elements. It later merged with the hip-hop group DRAGZ to form D.A.Z.MACHINE, a project that reflected the emerging stylistic hybridisation of post-Soviet alternative music (Yevtushenko, 2004). Kolezkyi Asesor, considered a cult phenomenon of Kyiv’s late Soviet underground, was among the most notable bands to emerge from Ukraine’s alternative rock scene of the 1980s and early 1990s. The public debut took place in the spring of 1988 at the Rock-Dialog festival in Kyiv, a key platform for emerging underground musicians. The creative peak came between 1987 and 1993. All core members (Vasyl Hoidenko, Hlib Butuzov, Sashko Kievtsiev, Oleksii

Ryndenko) were graduated of Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, which by the late 1980s had become a vibrant site of musical experimentation and student-led subcultural activity (Yevtushenko, 2004). Kolezkyi Asesor stood out for the bold musical vision and formal innovation, blending art rock with post-punk and employing unconventional structures and genre-defying arrangements. The live shows were notable for grotesque sonic textures, irreverent lyrics, and provocative stage design. Frontman Vasyl Hoidenko crafted a theatrical visual identity that combined historical references – including military coats, Renaissance costumes, and masks – with absurd elements such as oversized pajamas. This deliberate polystylistic contrast reflected the group’s Dadaist influences and surrealist tendencies. Positioned at the forefront of Ukraine’s alternative rock movement, the performances often provoked a sense of cultural rupture, using noise, poetic fragmentation, and spontaneous theatrics as instruments of aesthetic resistance.

In 1988, the Kyiv-based bands Kolezkyi Asesor, Vopli Vidopliassova, Rabbota KHO, and Er.Dzhaz jointly established an artistic coalition known as the Rok-Artil. Each of these bands represented a distinct strand within the broader field of Ukrainian alternative music, ranging from punk and post-punk to psychedelia and new age. The initiative emerged as a response to growing internal tensions within the official Kyiv Rock Club (n.d.), from which many independent artists increasingly kept the distance. At the helm of the new, emerging countercultural movement stood Oleksandr Lytovka, whose managerial role in legendary Ukrainian alternative bands helped shape the foundations of an independent youth scene. The coalition’s primary performance space in 1988 was a concert and dance hall located in Holosiivskyi Park. Symbolically, this venue was situated on the opposite side of the city from the Bolshevik Palace of Culture, which housed the state-sanctioned rock club. This alternative venue became a vibrant nucleus for concerts and experimental festivals, distinguished by the high degree of aesthetic freedom and nonconformist spirit. Rok-Artil went on to tour extensively across Ukraine, throughout the former Soviet republics, and abroad, with notable performances in Poland and Scotland. Like many participants in the Ukrainian rock underground of the time, the musicians opted for self-production and independent distribution of the albums, bypassing official Soviet recording studios. The collective came to symbolise not only cultural resistance, but also the experimental ethos that defined Kyiv’s late-1980s music scene, serving as a key chapter in the development of Ukrainian alternative rock.

A major impetus for the popularisation of punk and alternative rock in Ukraine came with the launch of the Chervona Ruta festival, first held in Chernivtsi in 1989. According to P. Long (2024), the event “spurred an explosion of yet another stylistic current in Ukrainian music – punk rock”. The top prize in the “Rock music” category was awarded to the Lviv-based punk-rock

singer Sestrichka Vika, while second place went to the band Braty Hadiukiny. Both acts captivated the jury and audiences through the rebellious punk sonics and irony-laden lyrics. The inaugural edition of Chervona Ruta can be interpreted more broadly as an act of nonconformist cultural resistance that challenged institutional structures. Local authorities attempted to relocate the rock stage outside the city limits, denied accreditation to numerous performers. As such, the festival became emblematic of underground artistic expression clashing with the Soviet cultural system. One of the most vivid manifestations of the Lviv alternative rock-scene at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s was the creative synergy between the punk-influenced band Braty Hadiukiny and singer Sestrichka Vika (Viktoriiia Vradii). Both emerged as emblematic figures of local cultural resistance, combining musical eclecticism with social satire and Galician linguistic colour. Braty Hadiukiny, founded in 1988, developed a hybrid style blending punk, reggae, ska, blues, and folk, while Sestrichka Vika – whose early roots lay in folk-beat – embraced a rebellious artistic persona, infusing the performances with irony, theatricality, and political critique. The collaboration, particularly visible at the Chervona Ruta festival and on landmark recordings, helped define the sound and ethos of Western Ukrainian alternative rock. As noted by S. Manko (2021), “the artistic mastery was marked by an especially rich and emotionally charged sonic character”. This convergence

of satire, stylistic hybridity, and regional identity produced a unique form of musical dissent that significantly shaped the broader Ukrainian underground.

In the mid-1980s, Odesa became the first Ukrainian city to establish a formal rock club, which evolved into a major centre of musical life in the Soviet Union. Founded in 1986 under the auspices of youth organisations, the Odesa City Rock Club unified more than twenty diverse bands, including Bastion, Krater, Provintsiiia, and Igrushka (Yevtushenko, 2004). The club fostered a distinct musical culture marked by melodic richness, high technical proficiency, and a strong sense of artistic integrity. Unlike the typical marginalisation associated with rock musicians, Odesa’s scene was shaped by highly educated artists, who actively resisted Soviet ideological expectations. Throughout the late 1980s, Odesa rock bands participated in numerous regional and national festivals, earning a reputation for stylistic diversity, solidarity, and professionalism. This vibrant period was captured in the film *Dysk-Zhokey* (1987). The Odesa scene’s emphasis on cooperation, musical eclecticism, and cultural resilience secured its unique place in the history of Ukrainian alternative rock. Among the alternative rock bands that emerged in the late 1980s and continued the creative activity into the 1990s, several became emblematic of the evolving Ukrainian scene. The stylistic variety, geographical spread, and artistic distinctiveness were outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Ukrainian alternative rock bands of the late 1980s-1990s

Band	City	Genre/Style	Distinctive features
Tzukur-Bila Smert	Kyiv	Gothic-inspired alternative	Dark atmosphere, theatrical performance
Viy	Kyiv	Dark-ethnic-fusion	Folk motifs combined with post-punk aesthetics
Tsvirkunove Chyslo	Kyiv	Art-jazz-rock	Experimental structure, improvisational approach
Chaika	Kharkiv	Funk-influenced alternative	Groove-oriented sound, fusion with jazz elements
KPP	Kharkiv	Hard-n-heavy rock	Strong guitar riffs, underground club scene presence
Liuk	Kharkiv	Experimental rock	Electronic and jazz-infused textures
Foa-Hoka	Chernihiv	Psychedelic rock	Use of ambient soundscapes and multimedia elements
TOK	Dnipro	Heavy metal/alternative	Powerful sound, socially critical lyrics
SAD	Dnipro	Metal/post-punk	Expressionistic vocal style, dark imagery
Galaktyka	Dnipro	Metal-rock	Cosmic thematics, energetic stage presence
999	Lviv	Eclectic heavy metal/gothic rock	Deliberately eclectic and unpredictable style
Zhaba v dyryzhabli	Kyiv	Punk-rock with theatrical elements	Founded by Bohdan Kharchenko (professional clown), ironic and absurdist performance aesthetics

Source: developed by the author

A distinctive feature of the alternative rock scene in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s was the increasingly performative self-identification of both musicians and the audiences, who began to actively mark out the identity through characteristic clothing and accessories. Just as in the West during the 1980s, in Ukraine “it was a challenge to the established rules and fashion of that time, it was even more like a protest against neatness and completeness” (Kyselova *et al.*, 2021). The “neformaly” (nonconformists) of the 1990s, while

listening to rock music, expressed the protest not against party officials, but rather against the older generation. This was a form of generational rebellion directed at the lingering “soviet mentality” that continued to shape the worldview of those, who had grown up in the USSR, and “the post-communist past, therefore, has not been completely overcome” (Vashchenko *et al.*, 2022). In the 1990s, self-identification within various branches of alternative rock was often articulated through the performative presentation of “otherness” at rock festivals.

This period witnessed the emergence of numerous festivals across Ukraine, some of which were oriented toward specific musical genres. Notable examples included the rock festivals Rock'n'Roll Tavriiskyi, Nivroku, Taras Bulba, and Rock-Exystentsiia (Yevtushenko, 2004). Scientists M. Besaha *et al.* (2022) noted that one significant initiative from this period was the following: “in 1990, a young generation of Lviv activists and artists organised the Vyvykh alternative culture festival, which was repeated in 1992”.

A product of the same wave of cultural self-organisation was the Alternatyva festival, held in 1994 and 1995 at the Ukraine Sports Palace in Lviv. It became one of the key platforms for presenting non-commercial and experimental music, contributing significantly to the development of an interregional community within the Ukrainian musical underground. Alternatyva was among the earliest large-scale efforts in the 1990s to curate a platform in Ukraine dedicated exclusively to independent and non-commercial music. This event not only demonstrated a high level of youth interest in the alternative scene, but also helped to establish new cultural reference points for independent Ukrainian music. The festival functioned as an interregional cultural platform, bringing together representatives from various local scenes, including the Kyiv Rock Club, Kharkiv's Nova St-sena art community, Lviv-based bands, and participants from other Ukrainian cities. Its concept was rooted in presenting a wide spectrum of independent music, ranging from already established bands (such as Vopli Vidopliassova and Plach Yeremii) to lesser-known formations that remained in the underground and disappeared from the broader cultural field despite the experimental or innovative potential (including 999, Reliktovi vantazhivky, Nekropol, and Apelsynove nepodobsvo). The presence of international performers, most notably the British band The Ukrainians, “underscored the openness of the Ukrainian scene to transnational influences and dialogue” (Sherman & Sheshuryak, 2021).

One of the leading figures of Ukraine's 1990s rock-alternative scene was the Kharkiv-based ensemble Kzma-Kzma. Founded in 1991 by multi-instrumentalist Yevhen Khodosh and flutist Dmytro Kurovskiy, both formerly of the folk-punk band Tovarysh, the group expanded into a seven-piece “rock orchestra” with members on drums, French horn, trumpet, bassoon, and piano. Among the members was Oleh Mykhailiuta (Fozzy), later a key figure in TNMK (Yevtushenko, 2004). Kzma-Kzma blended folk-punk, art metal, progressive rock, and Renaissance-inspired stylisations into a unique, eclectic sound. The lyrics, resembling futurist poetry styled as madrigals and sonnets, were rich in symbolism and Dadaist irony. Early performances featured large abstract paintings by Dmytro Kurovskiy, emphasising the experimental aesthetic. Active on the alternative festival circuit for six years, the band gradually shifted from folk-punk toward more meditative, post-industrial gothic

influences, especially after Dmytro Kurovskiy's departure to industrial project Foa-Hoka, which marked a decline in Kzma-Kzma's prominence. It was possible to draw parallels between Kolezkyi Asesor and Kzma-Kzma. Both represented distinct yet convergent trajectories of experimental practice within the Ukrainian alternative scene. While Kolezkyi Asesor emphasised sonic provocation, aesthetic dissonance, and performative absurdism, Kzma-Kzma combined literary experimentation with complex musical hybridity rooted in folk-punk and art-rock traditions. In different ways, both bands expanded the conceptual and stylistic boundaries of Ukrainian underground music, foregrounding a Dadaist sensibility and a critical rethinking of cultural norms. Among the key figures of Odesa's underground culture in the early 1990s was Stas Podlypskyi, founder of the project Klub Unylykh Lits (KUL). The band cultivated a distinctive style of spirited and intelligent punk rock, characterised by humour, occasional use of informal language, and a consciously non-conformist aesthetic. Despite numerous lineup changes and periods, when Podlypskyi stepped away to pursue an uncompromising rock-and-roll lifestyle, each return of KUL to the stage, even after long interruptions, consistently generated notable nostalgic excitement among the Odesa audience.

Another example of Kyiv's 1990s alternative scene was the group Vsiak Vypadok, founded in 1994 by bassist Oleh Putiatin and vocalist-guitarist Yevhen Bartnychuk. Oleh Putiatin had previously led the experimental projects Tsvirkunove Chyslo and Sluchay Chego. After recording the debut album Tish Damsha, the band gained recognition at the 1995 Chervona Ruta festival and moved toward avant-garde experimentation. The 1995 album Toho marked a shift toward conceptual and genre-defying work, integrating elements of jazz rock, psychedelic, art rock, and folk. Later albums such as Fonari, Psykhopompa, Trava-Baiun, and Zhidkie svoistva explicitly rejected genre classifications. Known for absurdist multimedia performances, the group's improvisational style and instrumental complexity bridged music and theatre – particularly through collaboration with the Telniuk Sisters in the 2001 stage production Ukrainskiy burzhuaznyi natsionalist (Kovalskiy, n.d.). As such, Vsiak Vypadok represented a vital strand in the development of Ukrainian alternative rock, serving as a platform for innovation, genre hybridisation, and artistic self-expression.

Therefore, it was worth noting that the lifting of Soviet-era restrictions on rock music in the 1990s led to two key developments. The first was that many bands that had emerged in the 1980s gradually lost the original alternative identity and transitioned into the mainstream. A prominent example was Vopli Vidopliassova, whose increasing popularity resulted in significant changes to the group's lineup. In the mid-1990s, guitarist Yurii Zdorenko and bassist Pipa left the band and went on to form Borshch, a project characterised by a heavier, less conventional sound. Later, in 2008, Pipa

launched the own project, @Traktor, which explored a raw and aggressive style of punk grounded in classic sonic aesthetics. The second key development was the intensification of subcultural life across Ukraine. While S. Ovcharenko (2023) identified Kharkiv, Kyiv, Odesa, and Lviv as the primary epicentres of this activity during the 1990s, the growth of alternative rock extended well beyond these major cities. During 1990-2000, Ukraine witnessed the emergence and diversification of alternative rock styles across a wide range of genres. This momentum was not confined to large urban centres, but also took root in smaller towns, where local scenes developed around youth clubs, informal collectives, and grassroots festivals. Regional bands and communities cultivated distinct sonic identities that blended local cultural influences with global rock aesthetics. These decentralised networks of musicians and audiences facilitated the exchange of ideas and fostered a broader sense of belonging to a cultural movement that positioned itself in opposition both to the Soviet legacy and to the emerging commercial mainstream.

The development of Ukrainian alternative rock diverged notably from its Western analogues, shaped by the intertemporal period spanning the 1980s-1990s. During this transitional moment, Ukraine's musical landscape existed between the decline of state-controlled socialist cultural policy and the rise of both post-Soviet counterculture and Western-style commercial music industries. This context fostered some of the most original and culturally resonant expressions of Ukrainian alternative rock. As R. Fürst (2021) observed that "rock and its accompanying subcultures, which voiced the rebellious attitudes of young people against the communist political establishments in these regions in the second half of the 20th century, expanded to the point of becoming a challenge for the local regimes, and eventually provided the victorious soundtrack to the Eastern and Central European regimes' domino-effect collapse in the 1990s". In the Ukrainian context, this cultural rupture was exemplified by events such as the 1989 Chervona Ruta festival. This publicly marked the ascendancy of musical dissent and subcultural expression. Therefore, the social function of alternative rock in Ukraine during its time as part of the USSR was fundamentally different. As R. Fürst (2021) noted, "alternative rock under communist regimes played a more significant social role, as it represented the minority that rejected official mass culture – which was the case in East Europe until 1989". This observation was particularly relevant to the Ukrainian context, where both elite and popular art forms often acquired an underground status due to the nonconformist stance. Alternative rock, in this case, served not only as a medium of aesthetic experimentation, but also as a site of ideological dissent. Through its opposition to cultural conformity, censorship, and the limitations imposed by the Soviet system, it functioned as a politically charged expression of a marginalised,

anti-establishment cultural stratum. As S. Ovcharenko (2023) noted, "the underground as a parallel reality of the art scene under totalitarianism is defined as the voluntary underground of cultural creation". This position aligned with the interpretation of alternative rock as a form of cultural resistance expressing the values and identity of nonconformist, anti-Soviet constituencies within late socialist society. This countercultural opposition partially aligned with the idea expressed by A.B. Clark & A.J. Lonsdale (2023), who argued that "the fans of these oppositional musical styles (i.e., hard rock, heavy metal, punk) were uniquely more inclined to judge the social groups more favourably".

Ultimately, one of the most defining features of alternative rock was, as G. Smirnova (2021) put it, "the quest for making the listener step out of the comfort zone". This idea fully aligned with the aesthetic of Ukrainian alternative rock during the 1980s-1990s. In the 1980s, the Ukrainian alternative rock-scene emerged in response to the officially sanctioned Soviet estrada and ideologised mass culture. This music challenged conventional stylistic norms and addressed topics that were taboo in the official discourse. The core aim of "making the listener step out of the comfort zone" was achieved both through unconventional sound, form, and performance style, and through provocative, subversive lyrical content. In the 1990s, following the disappearance of censorship restrictions, this impulse only intensified. Independent bands focused less on pleasing the audience and more on provoking thought, resisting mainstream "pop" culture, and experimenting across genres. The principle of challenging passive music consumption became one of the defining features of the Ukrainian alternative scene at the end of the 20th century (Melnyk, 2024).

Thus, in the 1990s, Ukrainian alternative rock made a distinct ideological leap, aligning itself more closely with the trajectory of Western alternative movements. Ideologically, it came to serve as a counterpart to the emerging Western-style mainstream music industry, which was beginning to take shape in Ukraine by imitating European and American models. As noted by O. Vashchenko *et al.* (2022), "Ukrainian listeners have been actively involved in the dissemination of European music". However, unlike the broader European and American trajectories in the development of alternative rock, the Ukrainian alternative scene wasn't transition into the realm of mainstream entertainment and had remained firmly rooted in the underground. In Ukraine, alternative rock still wasn't reflecting a widespread social demand. It aligned closely with the aesthetic associated with the DIY ethos – a framework that has shaped Western punk comradeship since the 1980s. J.C. Goshert (2022) identified punk comradeship as "the mechanism of social enculturation that reorients punk into an inclusionary, activist endeavour working in its own interests rather than those of the culture industry". This notion resonated with the Ukrainian experience, where alternative

rock continued to function less as a commercial product and more as a form of grassroots cultural resistance and self-organisation.

DIY within countercultural movements functioned as a mode of self-identification and a means of asserting autonomy through resistance to commercialisation. This dynamic, which was likewise characteristic of the Ukrainian alternative scene of the late 1980s-1990s, aligns with broader scholarly interpretations of DIY as a form of cultural resistance and self-organisation within youth subcultures operating outside mainstream structures (McKay, 1998; Kovach, 2024). The DIY ethos rests on several core principles: it fosters open creative communities, supports self-managed distribution networks (“distros”), and prioritises self-funded releases that are typically sold at live events and feature handcrafted visual design, including album covers.

Alternative rock in Ukraine, like much of the country’s musical underground, already exhibited key features of the DIY ethos as early as the 1980s. In the Soviet

era, Ukrainian alternative bands were denied access to official recording studios due to ideological restrictions. By the early 1990s, the recording industry in Ukraine remained underdeveloped, prompting most groups to self-record and distribute the work. This DIY circulation was complemented by informal platforms such as the so-called “Balka” – a regular informal marketplace, where music enthusiasts and unofficial vendors exchanged vinyl records, cassettes, posters, and other forms of cultural paraphernalia. Such spaces became sites not only of economic exchange, but also of symbolic and subcultural significance, sustaining an emergent musical public sphere outside both state and commercial institutions. The educational and communicative dimensions of the DIY ethos in Ukraine manifested not only through informal practices of music production and distribution, but also through the emergence of independent music periodicals and grassroots initiatives that sustained local alternative scenes. Table 2 presented an overview of major Ukrainian samizdat rock magazines of the 1980s-1990s.

Table 2. Key Ukrainian samizdat rock magazines (1980s-1990s)

Title	City/Region	Years of publication	Editors	Content/Focus	Distinctive features and significance
KiMik (“Kyivskiy mikrofon” – Kyiv Microphone)	Kyiv	1987 (2 issues)	Y. Dunaiev	Reviews of early Kyiv rock performances and articles on the history of rock music	The first Kyiv rock magazine, focused on the emerging scene of the mid-1980s
Huchnomovets (“Loudspeaker”)	Kyiv	1988-1990 (6 issues)	T. Ezhova, K. Ezhov, V. Shamrai, and others	Interviews, concert and album reviews, cultural essays	Issued by the Kyiv Rok-Artil association, examined regional rock phenomena across Ukraine
Bonba	Kyiv	1988 (2 issues)	V. Shamrai (manager of the band Kolehskiy Asesor)	Satirical essays, provocative humour. Featured conceptual articles and experimental rock commentary	Gained cult notoriety for its biting irony and provocative, satirical tone, reflecting the intellectual and rebellious spirit of Kyiv’s underground scene
Subyektykon	Kyiv	1987-1989 (5 issues)	G. Pavlov	Punk review, aggressive and sarcastic style	Anti-conceptual, unconventional project based on the inner-scene colour and atmosphere
Halas	Kyiv	1996-1998 (published monthly)	O. Yevtushenko (Editor-in-Chief)	Analytical essays, rock journalism, scene documentation	A crucial platform for documenting and analysing the emerging Ukrainian rock culture
Polozhenie Del	Kharkiv	1988-early 1990s	S. Myasoedov and others	Ukrainian rock development, indie bands, festivals	Provided systematic coverage of regional music scenes
Rock Courier (later evolving into Rock’n’Roll Kharkivshchyna)	Kharkiv	1985-1987	Y. Podolskiy and others	Focused on documenting the early Kharkiv rock scene; featured reviews, band profiles, and reports on concerts	Provided rare primary documentation of the local scene’s formation

Table 2, Continued

Title	City/Region	Years of publication	Editors	Content/Focus	Distinctive features and significance
Volapyuk	Dnipro	1987-1988 (6 issues)	D. Desyaterik	Local rock scene (Reportazh, TOK)	An earnest attempt to mythologise the Southern Ukrainian rock scene
Shism	Sumy	1993 (4 issues)	L. Savin	Metal scene, extremist aesthetics	English-language publication distributed in Belgium, controversial in tone
Lystva	Luhansk	1988-1990 (4 issues)	V. Basovski, O. Ivashev, O. Pritykin, Yu. Tkachenko, K. Karpets	Donbas rock, with Luhansk rock at the forefront.	Combined regional reporting with social commentary and satire
Hey-hop!	Ivano-Frankivsk	1988-1989 (4 issues)	Yu. Kosik	Punk rock; subcultural slang debates, interviews from concerts and festivals	Reflection of the creative pluralism of the Ukrainian underground

Source: based on D. Antsybor (2024)

Analysed, independent media outlets played a formative role in raising public awareness, cultivating musical communities, and circulating knowledge outside formal institutions – functions that align with the DIY ethos and its broader emphasis on cultural autonomy and self-organisation. As D. Antsybor (2024) observed, “the creation of such magazines fully embodied the principles of DIY: to produce an edition from scratch and distribute it among insiders, thereby nurturing and expanding the subcultural environment”. Such practices of self-organisation, self-publishing, and peer-to-peer distribution underscored, how the Ukrainian alternative rock community of the late 1980s and 1990s embodied the core values of the DIY ethos. This was evident not only in its emphasis on autonomy, collectivism, and non-commercial cultural production, but also in the development of alternative systems of knowledge transmission and artistic formation based on lived experience, mutual support, and resistance to institutional hierarchies.

The educational potential of the DIY ethos manifested not only through independent journalism and autonomous music production, but also through interdisciplinary forms of cultural exchange that broadened the possibilities for self-expression under new socio-cultural conditions. A striking illustration of this dynamic was the emergence of Ukrainian rock poetry in the 1990s, particularly through collaborations between poets from the Lviv-based Bu-Ba-Bu literary group (Viktor Neborak, Oleksandr Irvanets, and Yurii Andrukhovych) and musicians from bands such as Mervtyi Piven and Plach Yeremii. As noted by N. Babii (2021), “the festival movement, along with numerous concerts, rallies, and cultural events in open urban spaces during the 1990s, contributed to the collaboration between poets and musicians”, fostering a unique atmosphere of openness and cross-disciplinary innovation. The movement of poetic

text from the printed page into the sonic space of rock compositions functioned as both a cultural experiment and a means of dissolving the boundaries between “high” and “low” art, between authorship and performance, and between individual and collective modes of expression. Such collaborations can be viewed as localised expressions of the DIY ethos in Ukraine, blending creative autonomy with alternative models of cultural production that operated independently of both state institutions and commercial industries.

The constraints of the Soviet cultural environment in the 1980s, particularly the rigid control over official music infrastructure, gave rise to informal initiatives. Among the most notable were local rock clubs, which functioned as key hubs of the underground scene. As O. Sapozhnik (2024) observed, “clubs in different cities worked closely with each other and constantly organised festivals. Rock clubs were created by enthusiasts and musicians, so such clubs were a symbiosis of a rehearsal base, a concert venue, an information centre and a replication company”. These clubs served not only as rehearsal and performance spaces, but also as informal information networks, platforms for peer exchange among musicians, and centres for independent creative output. The activities ranged from recording demo tapes and circulating bootleg concert footage to producing zines and other alternative media. This self-organised model closely aligned with the DIY ethos that defined the alternative scene, enabling it to function independently of official institutions. In the Soviet context, such autonomy carried both aesthetic and political weight: these clubs fostered free self-expression and allowed alternative music to thrive as a form of counterculture in opposition to state-sanctioned socialist mass culture. It was from these grassroots efforts that a uniquely Ukrainian alternative rock scene emerged

in the 1990s, rooted in local culture and responsive to wider European resistance movements.

In examining the historical, cultural, and political conditions that gave rise to DIY culture, T. Kovach (2024) emphasised its “protest-driven nature”, which “shaped alternative modes of self-expression across diverse social settings”. The emergence of Ukrainian alternative rock during the intertemporal period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of an independent national culture allowed it to merge nonconformist protest with the pursuit of new aesthetic forms. Developed outside the structures of official culture, this movement reflected the core principles of the DIY ethos, including autonomous distribution, grassroots communities, and independent media. In this context, Ukrainian alternative rock served not only aesthetic, but also sociopolitical, educational, and identity-building functions. It became a platform for self-reflection, cultural resistance, and the articulation of a new cultural paradigm. This formative moment was therefore crucial for understanding both the trajectory of national rock culture and the broader dynamics of post-totalitarian cultural resistance. Ukrainian alternative rock in the 1980s and 1990s should be seen not merely as a musical phenomenon, but as a form of cultural self-organisation situated between two ideological systems. During this intertemporal period, alternative rock functioned as an intermediary cultural institution, remaining autonomous from both Soviet cultural orthodoxy and Western commercial music industries. Unlike many of its Western counterparts, Ukrainian alternative music was not absorbed into the mainstream. Instead, it retained its underground character and sustained the ethos of DIY as its primary mode of creative and social expression. In this sense, the Ukrainian case presented a unique example of prolonged cultural autonomy, where alternative rock generated a form of “cultural sovereignty” amid the uncertainties of national self-definition.

Conclusions

Alternative rock in Ukraine, which first emerged in the 1980s as a response to the aesthetic and ideological constraints of Soviet state-sanctioned estrada music, gradually evolved into a complex, multi-genre system encompassing a wide range of unofficial musical practices. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the underground scene gave rise to diverse stylistic formations, collectively constituting a space of independent cultural production. This space was interpreted as a form of self-organised cultural agency, operating outside both the boundaries of ideological control and the emergent

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mechanisms of commercial music industries. Unlike its Western European counterparts, Ukrainian alternative rock was rarely absorbed into the mainstream. Instead, it maintained characteristics of marginality, DIY-oriented ethics, and subcultural autonomy.

Within the intertemporal framework that marked the transition between two political and cultural paradigms, Ukraine’s alternative rock scene functioned as an informal institution that articulated a discourse of freedom, self-expression, and stylistic pluralism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the bands Adem, Kazma-Kazma, Kolezkyi Asesor, Klub Unylykh Lits (KUL), Vsiak Vypadok, and others represented key trajectories in the formation of Ukrainian alternative rock, integrating elements of post-punk stylistic markers, art-rock conceptualism, and avant-garde experimentation, thereby shaping the subsequent development of the genre. The musical practices significantly expanded the genre boundaries of Ukrainian rock music and laid the groundwork for later artistic innovations within the alternative scene. Within this broader cultural dynamic, local hubs together with festival platforms played an instrumental role in disseminating new musical forms and fostering environments of creative interaction. Of particular significance were the interdisciplinary collaborations between musicians and poets or theatre collectives. This extended the communicative reach of the alternative scene. Although there was little demand from mainstream cultural institutions, a distinct and emancipated cultural field nonetheless emerged, this field was understood as a manifestation of cultural sovereignty. So, late 20th century Ukrainian alternative rock seen as both a form of resistance and a vehicle of cultural innovation, reflecting the transformative energies of a post-totalitarian society and aligning with wider European countercultural shifts. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives to further advance the analysis of local scenes, transnational parallels, and the evolving mechanisms of cultural self-organisation within Ukrainian alternative rock.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses her gratitude to colleagues and members of the music community for their consultations, discussions, and exchange of materials that contributed to the implementation of the study.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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Олена Серова

Кандидат мистецтвознавства, доцент
Національна академія керівних кадрів культури і мистецтв
01015, вул. Лаврська, 9, м. Київ, Україна
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5541-1323>

Альтернативний рок в Україні у контексті DIY-практик і субкультурної динаміки кінця ХХ століття

■ **Анотація.** Актуальність цього дослідження зумовлена недостатньою кількістю комплексних міждисциплінарних робіт, що розглядали естетичні характеристики, субкультурну та контркультурну динаміку, а також значення етики Do-It-Yourself у формуванні автономної музичної інфраструктури. Метою дослідження було простежити становлення, еволюцію та соціокультурні функції українського альтернативного року в період 1980-1990-х років. Результати показали, що українська альтернативна рок-сцена функціонувала як форма культурної самоорганізації, незалежна як від державної ідеології, так і від музичної індустрії, що зароджувалася. Вона відображала естетику спротиву, жанрової гібридності, міждисциплінарної взаємодії (зокрема з літературою та театром) і прагнення культурного суверенітету. Етика Do-It-Yourself виступала не лише практичною стратегією виживання, а й засобом соціальної ідентифікації та політичного самовираження. Попри обмежену підтримку з боку інституцій мейнстримної культури, українська альтернативна сцена 1990-х років сформувала емансиповану культурну сферу, що може бути інтерпретована як прояв культурного суверенітету. У дослідженні визначено локальні рок-клуби, фестивалі та незалежні медіа як ключові платформи, що сприяли поширенню альтернативних музичних практик. Було підкреслено тривале збереження андеграундного характеру українського альтернативного року, який, на відміну від західних аналогів, не був повністю інтегрований у мейнстрим. Це зробило український випадок унікальним прикладом пролонгованої культурної автономії у пострадянському просторі. У статті запропоновано розглядати український альтернативний рок кінця ХХ століття як неформальний культурний інститут, що поєднував протестний та творчий потенціал у контексті посттоталітарної трансформації. Практичне значення дослідження полягає у визначенні підходів до аналізу українського музичного андеграунду як форми контркультурного висловлювання та субкультурної автономії

■ **Ключові слова:** український рок; субкультурна ідентичність; технологія Do-It-Yourself; андеграундна музика; культурний спротив