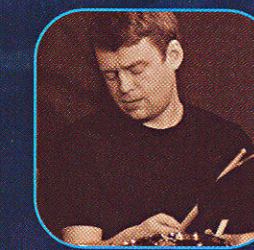


TAKE FIVE

Russian jazz musicians take Time Out to talk during U.S. visit

by Kevin Rayburn



Early in their lives, five Russians heard John Coltrane or Dave Brubeck or Count Basie and got turned on to jazz. Now professional musicians, they recently came to the United States to play and hear jazz in the land that gave birth to the music they love.

In February the five Russians—ranging in age from 23 to 40—were in Louisville for an intensive 15-day whirlwind visit that included performing concerts, participating in jazz master classes and partaking of local cultural activities.

The visit coincided with the University of Louisville's annual Jazz Week. As artists in residence at U of L, they performed Jazz Week concerts in the School of Music's Comstock Hall and at the Jazz Factory (pictured above).

Their visit was supported through a federal cultural-exchange program known as Open World. Its mission is to forge better understanding between the United States and Russia by bringing leaders in the arts to the States to interact with their artistic peers and learn about American cultural life. This is the second time that U of L has served as an Open World site, according to Mike Tracy, coordinator of U of L's Open World program.

Prior to their U of L concert the five musicians—referred to officially as "delegates"—took a break in their practice and performance schedule to talk about themselves and their visit.

Only four days in, at least one of the musicians already showed the strain of an itinerary that included more than 100 scheduled events.

"I am tired from so much conversation," said Maksim Nekrasov, a harmonica player from St. Petersburg who played a key part in organizing the Open World contingent.

Yet, seconds later, Nekrasov talked enthusiastically with his fellow musicians, a translator and American visitors when the subject turned to jazz and the music scene in Russia.

Nekrasov urged four of his colleagues in the St. Petersburg Jazz Philharmonic to become part of the Open World ensemble. They are drummer Andrey Ivanov, guitarist Maksim Belitskiy and bassist Robert Pilyakalnis. The youngest visitor, pianist and singer Natalya Smirnova, hails from Moscow.

Pilyakalnis, the oldest member of the group, stood clutching his bass and

talking about his excitement over visiting Louisville. He had heard of the city early in his education.

"I was familiar with the play-along music teaching materials put out by (U of L jazz instructor) Jamie Aebersold," he said.

A few nights before, the group sat in with Louisville vibraphonist Dick Sisto during a night engagement at the Seelbach Hotel bar.

The musicians said they found out that musicians in Russia and the United States earn their living in much the same ways.

"Everyone in this group survives by playing jazz in Russia," said the ensemble's translator Misha Feigin. "They play in concert halls, in small jazz cafes, in restaurants and at weddings."

The musicians agree that getting work as a jazz musician in Russia is easier than it used to be.

"Maybe 10 years or so ago there were times when you couldn't get a job, but that's changed," said Nekrasov. "People there appreciate jazz more today because it's on the radio and people want it for background music at special events. People in Russia are reaching a higher cultural level; they don't throw glasses anymore."

While in Louisville, the Russians stayed with area families.

"We feel these people we are living with here are our relatives," Pilyakalnis said. "Actually, our real relatives don't treat us this nicely."

Tracy says that the exchange boosts understanding on both sides of the cultural fence.

"I've had students here ask me, 'There's jazz in Russia?' Well, yes, and a lot of their young musicians play as well as our students here.

"They really are laying to rest the old ideas from my generation about Russians. Like us, they just want to play music and enjoy life."

So, how does it feel to play jazz?

"When I play a good concert, I feel elated," Nekrasov said. "When it doesn't go well, I feel shame."

Pilyakalnis added, "To play jazz is to swing. In other musical styles it is impossible to feel that way."

For more information on Open World, visit www.openworld.gov. ■