

THE JAZZ CONNECTION: RUSSIA / LOUISVILLE

By Mike Tracy

One often hears of how 'music is the universal language'. This statement was proven true once again during a recent visit to the University of Louisville's School of Music by eight jazz musicians from Russia. Visiting the United States for the first time, these excellent musicians spoke almost no English yet were able to communicate with all who came in contact with them via their music. Their visit was a once in a lifetime opportunity, enabling everyone who came in contact to experience another culture through America's own music - Jazz.

The Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program was one of four prestigious institutions selected to host this first-ever musical exchange sponsored by the Open World Leadership Center, the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts. The other institutions included the Dave Brubeck Institute (Stockton, California), the Thelonious Monk Institute (Washington, DC and Los Angeles, California) and the Lionel Hampton School of Music (Moscow, Idaho). Each institution played host to eight (thirty-two in total), hand-selected jazz musicians from throughout Russia. In Louisville, our goal was to afford these fine musicians the opportunity to experience life in America with a special focus on jazz. In addition to home stays with area families, visiting local places of interest and witnessing our political process in action, their experience would include taking lessons; participating in master classes; playing alongside our musicians in rehearsals, jam sessions and in performance; listening to jazz in a variety of venues and much more. They and our faculty and students were very active during their 17 day stay (September 23 - October 9).

The Russian musicians included saxophonist Ovagem Sultanyan, trumpeter Platon Polyanskiy, pianist Vsevolod Timofeyev, guitarist Aleksandr Rodovskiy - guitar, bassists Olga Krukovskaya and Vladimir Chernitzin, and drummers Aleksandra Mogilvich and Paval Mikheev. In addition, our group was supported by two facilitators from Russia, Albina Loboda and Konstantin Molotilov. Each lived with a host family, who helped to show them domestic life in a mid-American community. Spending time with a family is a important ingredient of any exchange program. Language and lifestyle challenges were easily overcome. After a couple of days everyone seemed comfortable and at home in Louisville. One additional challenge for the host families was the busy, late-night lifestyle of a musician.

A visit to Louisville would not be complete without a tour hosted by local historian Tom Owen. While Tom's tour was insightful, the highlight for our group would be their visiting area music and CD stores. They were amazed at the number of recordings and musical items available to them. Many left with new instruments and CDs.

Their first musical experience was to observe our jazz students and faculty at our weekly Jazz Area. They would quickly become acquainted with many of the faculty and students. Hearing our musicians perform helped to demonstrate just how similar our musical backgrounds and lives are. Many friendships developed during the visit with these similarities playing a vital role overcoming culture and language challenges.

Our visitors were very fortunate to be able to spend time with many of the leaders in jazz education. Their first master class was with probably the most recognized name in jazz education, Jamey Aebersold. Each had heard of Jamey and had been brought up on his educational materials. It was great to see the look on each face as they not only got to spend time with Jamey but to see firsthand just what were all his materials (books and CDs) originate. The three hour master class was exhilarating, but exhausting. Jamey worked with the group but also found time to focus on each individual. In addition, he generously gave each many books and recordings. It was most certainly a memorable meeting for all.

Another unique experience afforded our Russian friends was their day-long experience with the legendary Heath Brothers - bassist Percy, saxophonist Jimmy and percussionist Tootie. Percy and Jimmy have been recognized as Jazz Masters by the National Endowment for the Arts for their contributions to jazz. In addition to being master performers, Percy and Jimmy are outstanding communicators and educators. In fact, Jimmy was a longtime faculty member at Queens College/ City University of New York. Tootie is equally talented and an exceptional teacher. The Brothers, along with their pianist Jeb Patton, presented two, two-hour workshops for both our Russian visitors and UofL jazz students. It was a wonderful exchange of ideas, suggestions and experiences. The Heaths, ranging in age from 69 to 83, were able to energize the collective group with their tales and anecdotes about their life in the jazz world, telling stories about many of the legends of jazz who they knew and played alongside. The Modern Jazz Quartet, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk and more were all brought to life through their remembrances. This day ended with our Russian groups (piano trio and quintet) opening the evening concert featuring the Heath Brothers. It was clear to see and

hear how our visitors were affected by their time with the Heaths. Their music showed a sense of maturity and assuredness. The Heaths were, of course, outstanding with memorable moments from the group and each performer. However, the highlight for many was the closing duet with Jimmy and Jeb. It was a fitting way to conclude the day.

Our visitors were also involved in a number of other educational opportunities which offered additional perspectives. These included improvisation workshops with saxophonist Virginia Mayhew and pianist Harry Pickens. UofL School of Music faculty offered clinics by John La Barbara on computers in music and the music industry and with Chris Cook on the use of ProTools and related recording techniques. Jazz faculty members Chris Fitzgerald, Jim Connerley, Jerry Tolson and Mike Tracy rehearsed groups daily in a variety of combinations. Chris, Jim, Mike along with Jason Tiemann, Craig Wagner, Tyrone Wheeler and John La Barbera also worked with students individually in private lessons. Faculty members from the College of Business and Public Administration presented lectures on entrepreneurship (Bruce Kemelgor), accounting practices (Frederick Siegel) and how to start a new music business (Derek Cowherd).

There were numerous performing opportunities throughout their stay. In addition to the previously mentioned performance during the Heath Brothers concert, our group was featured one evening at Louisville's premier jazz venue – The Jazz Factory. Performing in a variety of combinations, they played to a sold-out house of jazz enthusiasts and many from Louisville's Russian community. It was a great opportunity for them to play for their countrymen in a setting which encouraged close communication. Other performing opportunities included a set at the annual Big Rock Jazz Fest, a SofM convocation, in jam sessions at the SofM and Jazz Factory and for students at the Brown School in downtown Louisville. During the Brown School and convocation performances the performers also spoke to the audience about their lives in Russia and their experiences as musicians. The group also appeared on television - once on KET [Kentucky Educational Television](which is broadcast throughout the state) and on WDRB-FOX 41's early morning talk show. SofM music students performed alongside our friends at KET and during the jam sessions. It was great seeing how everyone worked so well together.

The final two and a half days in Louisville were spent in the studio of TNT Recording. Our final endeavor was to create a CD showcasing the musical talents of all who participated in the Open World project - our Russian visitors, UofL students and faculty. Thirteen tracks were

recorded and mixed for the CD during this short time. There were two tracks which featured the Russian piano trio and quintet. The remainder combined individuals from the Russian group with various UofL students and faculty, forming groups that ranged in size from a duo to septet. The repertoire was selected by the groups themselves and featured jazz standards, originals, a traditional Russian song and even a Beatles tune. Everything went surprisingly smoothly when one considers all of the obstacles. The biggest challenge was the very limited rehearsal time. Most groups only had one rehearsal to select a tune, choose members, develop an arrangement and practice the material. John La Barbara and Tim Haertel's skill in recording and editing helped to overcome any problems that arose. The CD is an excellent example of the level of musicianship and cooperation that exists in our two countries.

Many new friendships had developed by the time our visitors had to depart. Part of their last day here was spent discussing the American university system. They were most interested in the application process and degree expectations. It was obvious to all participating in the discussion that their experience had been very positive and one which would have a lasting impression. Many were very insistent on looking into the possibility of returning to UofL, seeking to further their musical education. Our students were also most impressed with our Russian friends. It was easy to see the impact each group had on the other. Hopefully we will be able to continue to stay in touch with each other, possibly our students visiting Russia.

A special mention and thanks should go to the Matt Madden and the Louisville International Cultural Center for helping to coordinate home stays and visits around Louisville, guitarist Pat Lentz for acting as Assistant Coordinator, Gary Pahler at KET, Ken Shapero and the Jazz Factory, Nick Waldrop and the administration at the Brown School, the Highland-Douglass Big Rock Jazz Fest committee, the Board of the Louisville Jazz Society, translators - Misha Feigen, Igor Danchenko and Lena Pysareva, the staff at the School of Music - Deborah Hawley, Paul Detwiler, Steven Rahe, and Dean Christopher Doane and most importantly the Library of Congress / National Endowment of the Arts for supporting such a worthy program as the Open World Leadership Center and the Russian Cultural Leader Program.