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A lively Soviet-American jazz summit

By KEN FRANCKLING, UPI Jazz Writer



CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- There's nothing like a Soviet-American summit when the subject is jazz.

There was only playing, no negotiating, as two simultaneous tours by Soviet musicians crossed paths in Boston during their first visit to the United States.

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One tour took pianist Igor Bril's all-star Soviet band to eight U.S. cities. The other brought keyboard player Sergey Kuryokhin to 11 cities for solo gigs, group performances and collaborations with dancers.

And so it was that Kuryokhin and Bril's talented double bass player, Victor Dvoskin, wound up at Ryles' jazz club in Cambridge Tuesday night for Soviet-American jamming filled with joy and intensity.

They were reunited with a close friend, the talented young saxophonist Igor Butman, who moved to Boston last year after winning critics' polls as the top Soviet tenor player.

On hand were vibraphone master Gary Burton and the band Butman co-leads with Boston keyboard player Rachel Nicolazzo.

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Burton, Butman, and drummer Martin Richards opened things with Dvoskin, the Soviet Union's top jazz bassist for the past decade. Their set included 'Green Dolphin Street,' a traditional Russian song set to jazz, a Soviet jazz original and a basic blues.

Then it was Kuryokhin's turn to dazzle. He is 34, a contemporary keyboard player whose style touches on classical music, the avant-garde, boogie woogie and swing. He has been called the enfant terrible of the Soviet music underground but in recent years has gained celebrity status and official recognition in his homeland.

Kuryokhin's favorite musical element is surprise. He sat alone at an upright piano, delving into a composition he introduced only as 'The Year of 1851.' He made the battered old piano sound like a harpsichord, his blurring hands then mixed in some barrelhouse whimsy, Russian harmonies, and the atonal intensity of Cecil Taylor -- at twice the speed.

Soon Dvoskin turned it into a duet. Then they were joined by Butman, Richards and Nicolazzo. The intensity shifted as they bounced back and forth from ballad to bombast -- a reference to the Soviet anthem thrown in for good measure -- before the extended tune wound down 40 minutes later.

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Burton met and played with these Soviets on a 1982 concert trip with Chick Corea to Moscow and Leningrad. He called the reunion gig 'just a very warm situation. When I first met them six years ago, I never thought I would see the day they'd be visiting and playing here without chaperones. It was just a thrill.'

The tour brought Soviet jazz to Oberlin, Ohio, New York, Washington, D.C., Tucson, Ariz., Chicago, Miami, and Berkeley and Santa Cruz, Calif.

Alexey Batashev, a leading Soviet jazz critic, record producer and broadcaster, was on hand. He called the tour historic because it was arranged 'just through people's goodwill,' without any government support or red tape.

'The main result of perestroika and glasnost is simplification of possibilities, to go abroad and find alternative ways of presenting jazz music. We had only state concert bureaus before. Now we have cooperative concert bureaus,' Batashev said.

While the opportunities have increased, he says jazz has changed little in his country because of the nature of the genre.

'Jazz musicians in the Soviet Union have the opportunity to play whatever they want to play -- even in Brezhnev's times, in the 'era of stagnation' as we call it. They have always played absolutely without any control. Nobody bothered them about it.'

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