

PARADOXICAL FREEDOM BACK IN THE U.S.S.R.

**MUSICIAN**

# Russian JAZZ



BY MARK ROWLAND

Over in Leningrad they're probably still talking about the time Sergey Kuryokhin and Boris Grebenshchikov sawed apart a piano. Not that the deed was itself out of character, for Boris, an electric guitarist whose image and personal dynamism has sparked comparison with David Bowie, and Kuryokhin, a self-described "neurotic" and musician of extravagant technical facility, have long exhibited a flair for the dramatic. Who, after all, could forget their "Day In The Life Of A Sexually Obsessed Dinosaur," a performance which "climaxed" with both artists writhing on the floor in an orgasmic fury to the accompaniment of a cacophonous quartet? Or "Discourse On The East-West Divan," capstone of the first exclusively "free jazz" festival in the Soviet Union, in which Kuryokhin conducted his Creative Music Orchestra through a series of undulating musical moods, himself leaping about the stage and smashing together tin pots and cymbals as a woman in gypsy apparel emitted high-pitched screams?

No, the surprise was merely that Sergey Kuryokhin is



typically more disposed to unleash his passions through a piano rather than upon one. When he does, the scope of his talent is just as likely to startle. Following the release of his first solo recordings, *The Ways Of Freedom* (Leo Records) several respectable Western critics carped that the tape had obviously been sped up—surely no human could really play with such dexterity. In fact Kuryokhin does, but by now he's rather used to being misunderstood, even—especially—in his homeland. And at age thirty, this iconoclast who was booted out of two prestigious Soviet conservatories for professing "boredom" has enough confidence and sense of purpose to remain patient. "I will sit and wait for the opportunity," he's declared, "for the time when I am recognized as a genius, and am simply allowed to travel."

Perhaps like his idol, Vladimir Chekasin. At first glance Chekasin would seem an unlikely favorite of the Soviet establishment: for one thing he plays the saxophone, and for another, he's from Siberia. True, things have lightened a bit in Russia since the 30s purges, back when the sax was a symbol for Western subversion and just the mention of the word risked a ticket to the Gulag. But in the relatively cosmopolitan centers of Leningrad and Moscow, Siberia is still, well, Siberia. Yet Chekasin, a bearded, dark-featured and quietly intense man in his mid-40s, has become a figure of near legendary proportion. Having expertly assimilated styles of Western jazz icons like Bird and Coltrane along with the folk influences of his native Urals, Chekasin meshes them together with grace, passion and sharp humor. He has the gift of at once genuflecting before and mocking jazz tradition—a telling feature in a country where the very existence of his art seems itself a contradiction.

Chekasin is best known as a member of the Ganelin Trio, the most popular and advanced exemplars of progressive Russian jazz, where his coarse, powerful solos provide a kind of polar balance with the glib, Slavic intellectual underpinnings of pianist Vyacheslav Ganelin. Add to that his wild duets with Kuryokhin and his seminal influence on the nascent Soviet

## **"MUSIC IS THE ONLY WAY OUT. EVERYTHING ELSE IS CENSORED, EVERYTHING BUT IMPROVISATION."**

sub-genre of *Siberian* progressive music, and it becomes clear that Vladimir Chekasin is the single most important figure in the field of Russian avant-garde jazz.

Russian avant-garde jazz?

Does that moniker have an odd ring about it, like, say, Jamaican heavy metal, or Canadian samba? Perhaps, though, on second blush it fits perfectly—after all, a music of physical passion and intellectual rigor, succored on the blues, should strike a resonant chord for modern-day Russians, whose staunch intellectualism is the match for any culture, and who most certainly have the blues. Musicians in the Soviet Union have long shared a fascination with American jazz, while the government's attitude has been more pendular—swinging between "symbol of Western decadence" and "fruit of oppressed proletarian culture." But the current generation of progressive musicians have moved far beyond the imitative and derivative efforts which characterized their forebears. Abandoned by audiences which turned increasingly toward

rock during the late 60s, and hounded at the same time by Soviet authorities who viewed "free-form" music (correctly) as essentially uncensorable, modern composers and players were forced to hone their talents in a crucible forged by isolation and time. A decade later, they're emerging with a meld of old Russian classical influences, post-bop and free-form jazz, native folk idioms and improvisational theater. And the result, as Sergey Kuryokhin observes of his own work, distinctively reflects their environment: "to make a whole out of complex and contradictory elements... (so that) a paradox is produced in the music. It is very necessary, in the structure, to have a contradiction all the time."

*We have listened to and in one case actually jammed with some very fine jazz musicians... these fellows felt the music, and that's what impressed me. I don't know where they got the feeling, but they felt it.*

—B.B. King, during a tour of the Soviet Union

That Western listeners are at all privy to the current Russian jazz evolution is attributable, in large part, to the efforts of Leo Feigin, an expatriate now living in England. With slender build, thinning white hair, and an impeccable old world manner, Feigin certainly fits the part. He is an indefatigable booster of Kuryokhin, the Siberian Four and particularly the Ganelin Trio, and his facial expressions seem to assume an incandescent glow when discussing their merits. He has also produced ten albums' worth of Russian avant-garde jazz on his own Leo Records, all culled from smuggled tapes; these include six records by the Ganelin Trio, an album of duets by Kuryokhin with Chekasin, and another with the trumpet player Anatoly Vapirov (currently in prison for alleged black market dealings—but that's another story) and *Homo Liber*, the vinyl debut of the Siberian Four. (All are available through Leo Records, 130 Twyford Road, W. Harrow, Middlesex, England, or through New Music Distribution Service, 500 Broadway, New York City, NY 10012.) That pretty much comprises the catalog of modern Russian jazz (though the Ganelin Trio has recorded three records on the Soviet Melodiya label, and one on Enja, in West Germany) so Feigin, mindful of the curiosity and ignorance which invariably attends such discoveries, is eager to fill in the gaps.

The current movement had its genesis in the late 60s, according to Feigin, as Russian musicians were inspired by the spirit as well as conceptual freedoms from harmony, rhythms and textures offered by John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Sunny Murray and others. Their subsequent repression ironically had a bracing effect; instead of merely copping Western ideas as they came along, or "going commercial" (a rather ludicrous proposition in the Soviet Union anyway), musicians and composers were forced to develop their own concepts, which over time became increasingly elaborate. Even more ironically, says Feigin, their music was let out of the closet only because of the greater subversive threat currently posed by rock 'n' roll. "Russia is swamped, inundated with rock groups," notes Feigin with sardonic glee. "You see, rock is [seen as] the personification of Western propaganda—opium for the masses. So in this respect, the Soviet authorities see that jazz causes no harm. And secondly, they realize they are great musicians. The Ganelin Trio are popular of course, even to rock fans. But still; they could never approach such a level of popularity. So they are tolerated." Feigin shrugs.

The Ganelin Trio (Ganelin, Chekasin and drummer Vladimir Tarasov) has been working together for over a decade, and it shows: in the trio's intricate ensemble play, in their endless rush and jarring juxtaposition of musical ideas, by their apparently effortless ability to improvise amidst formal structures as delicate and as ornately contoured as a spider's web. Like Kuryokhin, their technical grasp strains credulity; together they play up to fifteen instruments (drummer Tarasov, for instance, also plays trumpet and flute, Ganelin contrapuntal



Piano virtuoso (and piano-sawing) "neurotic" Sergey Kuryokhin.

lines on a home-made basset, while Chekasin double tongues saxophones a la Roland Kirk), and often several in tandem. Upon release of their first Leo album, *Live In East Germany*, several reviewers refused to believe that the music was the creation of only three musicians.

"Mind you," warns Feigin, "what I have on record are maybe not their best performances. They don't really do them full justice." Still, he notes that sophisticated jazz listeners are often struck by the group's unusual passion and musical precision. "I played the beginning of *Live In East Germany* for Jamaaladeen Tacuma," Feigin recalls, "and he was standing there for three minutes with his mouth open. He said, 'My God, what power, what knowledge—how do they do that?' Don Cherry keeps talking about it. So their music is really..." his voice trails. "Especially when you see them onstage, if only you could. It's an entirely different feeling."

The Ganelins, it turns out, have a penchant for theatricality in live performance to rival Kuryokhin, for imaginative concepts if not sheer outrageousness. "They used to stage happenings in the mid-70s, and some of them were hilarious. For example—and you must remember it takes a lot of courage to do this sort of thing in Russia—the curtain was raised and they were onstage; Tarasov and Chekasin were playing, and Ganelin was lying on the sofa reading *Pravda*. And these two go on playing, really beautifully too, while Ganelin reads the paper. After a while he gets up, pours himself a cup of tea, goes back to lying on the sofa. He picks up the phone and dials his friends: 'Yeah, I've got these two freaks over playing music. Fantastic—well, not bad. Tomorrow, let's go skiing tomorrow.' He comes back to the sofa, makes some coffee. When the curtain falls, he's never played a note.

"Now Chekasin," he goes on, "Chekasin can be very expressive onstage, and at the same time a great improviser. And he can do it because he truly doesn't give a damn about anything and anybody but music. He expresses what he wants to. Some of his performances, are, I think, very sensual. I can't say sexual, but—somehow it's in the way he puts the microphones. Instead of playing with the saxophone, he puts the

microphone inside the saxophone, playing with the sound you see. And then it comes to him you see, it is like he is reaching an orgasm with his sound."

Such performances, as Feigin observes, give voice to emotions and ideas that would be dangerous to express in any other form. In Russia, "Music is the only way out. If you think about it, everything else is censored, everything but improvisation. They can express this spirit of freedom. Because if you do not express it through music but through something else, you become a dissident."

And, for all their radical form, these Russian musicians do tend to disassociate themselves from dissident concerns. "We speak totally different languages," declared Kuryokhin in an interview with the underground Russian jazz journal *Kravrat*. "They are on an exclusively political wavelength. I am striving for the freedom of art."

"Kuryokhin is a dissident in terms of the ideas he is expressing," notes Feigin. "He is expressing ideas, and that is what sets him apart. But first and foremost he is a musician. John Coltrane didn't consider himself a dissident—maybe if he was a lesser musician he would have made a fuss about it. But he was professing music as a healing force. So these musicians are, I think, in the same position. They cross this border into something bigger and more free—into freedom itself. And this tradition still lives in jazz for the Russian people."

Since the release of *Con Anima* on the Soviet Melodiya label in 1976, the Ganelin Trio has achieved a status and level of privilege unique among their peers, notably the chance to perform in Western Europe (in March of this year they toured England) and interact with Western musicians. Skeptics note that such exposure has its benefits for the state as well; proof that free jazz can flourish within the Soviet Union, while the tours help pump foreign currency into the economy. Not that musicians are themselves treated with any great deference; Ganelin complained to *Kravrat*, for instance, that the release of the trio's second Melodiya album was delayed for two years. And he still performs with his hand-made basset (a small bass keyboard) for lack of access to more sophisticated Western synthesizer technology. And some of Chekasin's more lyric wind effects on *Con Fuoco* were produced with folk whistles he bought for fifty kopecks at Tashkent market.

For Russian musicians, lack of access can be a serious occupational hazard—to tapes and records which could expand their musical vocabularies, to better instruments with which to refine their talents, even to each other. The U.S.S.R. is a big country after all, and cultural centers are few and far between; musicians living in the sticks, like Tashkent trumpeter Yuri Parfenov, may be fated to forego the kind of creative interplay with other artists necessary to foment artistic growth. To develop as a player thus requires fortune as well as dedication. It should go without saying that one does not actually make a living as an avant-garde jazz musician in the Soviet Union (or, for that matter, anywhere else). Two of the members of the Siberian Four, for example, are professional surgeons.

State-of-the-art recording equipment remains a fantasy. Just getting hold of a decent instrument can be fraught with tribulations; a good saxophone on the Russian black market (the only place they're readily available) costs up to 10,000 rubles, or a hundred months' salary.

"I have a friend who played saxophone in a Russian orchestra for ten, fifteen years," Feigin recalls. "And it was only when he came to the West that he realized he's been playing a faulty instrument. He brought it to a repair shop to have it cleaned, and the guy noticed that the valves leaked. After he repaired it, my friend had a completely different sound. But by then he'd nearly damaged his health, you see, because he'd been straining so hard to produce that kind of sound."

Despite such daunting conditions, the progressive jazz movement seems to be flowering, via that same mix of resourcefulness, concentration and esprit that informs the



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best of its music. When records become available, they are ritually scrutinized, then passed along the musicians' network. When Chekasin left Sverdlovsk, for example, he left his record collection to Vladimir Tolkachev, now alto saxophonist in the Siberian Four; Tolkachev credits that and the influence of Chekasin's formidable personality as the impetus behind his own acceptance of new jazz.

Though the Four's music is still somewhat emulative of late-60s Coltrane (John and Alice), Don Cherry, Archie Shepp and New York loft jazz, there are moments on *Homo Liber* when it promises to blossom into a thoroughly original Russian form that combines those styles with more spatial, native folk idioms. "In Siberia, European and Asian cultures have intermingled," notes drummer Sergey Belichenko. "For instance, I listen to the music of the Tuvinians—marvelous improvised music. They are Buddhists and their music is full of echoes of China and India. I listen to Central Asian music, particularly Uzbek. It seems to me Siberia has in concentrated form some essence of a pre-European past...all these musical influences could be very fruitful for the future of our jazz."

"I feel very close to the ideas of Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra, and [Pharoah] Sanders," adds Belichenko, perhaps more tellingly, "about music as an emanation of the universal spirit, as an expression of man's belonging to the cosmic world."

"For me," says Tolkachev, "music itself is a religion, which I value above all, an opportunity to go beyond the limits of everyday experience—to exist in another world."

**The Ganelin Trio lead the avant movement in Western exposure.**

*I was talking about Russian culture being isolated from the West. Some people see it as dependent on Western culture, subordinate yet detached. This sensation of inferiority gives Russian culture its special colouring and distinctive features, and at the same time an element of self-confidence...It could be said to be looking toward the West while being influenced by the East.*

—Sergey Kuryokhin

Whatever the future of Siberian jazz, the Ganelin Trio is still the standard bearer for the avant movement, and, with seven records available in the West, also the only artists whose development can be reasonably assayed. Formally the Trio seems headed toward bigger and better musical canvases. I'm impressed by the scope and grandeur of their recent projects, though for my own taste prefer their scaled-down and considerably more accessible works (but hey, I also prefer *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*). Into this latter group I'd include *Live In East Germany*, recorded in 1978 but still fresh today, a soulful and meticulously organized tableau that combines the finesse of Air with the majesty of the Art Ensemble Of Chicago. I also like the pun-filled *Con Fuoco* (favorite title: "Swan Cake") in which brevity proves the soul of wit; and the Trio's latest release, *Vide*, in which drummer Tarasov's driving, boppish pulse helps congeal elements as disparate as the drunken, zingy march that ends one side, and the eerie, celestial textures of Sun Ra which dominate the other. Their more ambitious double sets (*Ancora De Capo, Parts 1 And 2*, on Leo, *Non Troppo* on Enja and its companion piece *New Wine* on Leo) certainly have their moments of excitement and raw beauty, but there are stretches when the Trio appears to meander and lapse toward dissolution—though perhaps their journeys have simply become too convoluted for me to trace. According to Feigin, *Non Troppo* is a complete musical disassembly and recasting of a few bars from the jazz standard "Too Close For Comfort"; maybe so, but following the blueprints of such Byzantine architecture is not my idea of a high time.

Perhaps the most revealing music of all, however, can be heard on the frankly Dadaist *Exercises*, starring those wild and crazy guys Chekasin and Kuryokhin. From its start, a series of onomatopoeic vocal scattings followed by crazed and woolly saxophone rantings, *Exercises* embarks upon a wacky, jarring and frequently perverse rollercoaster ride into the maw of the absurd. One track is capped by a limpid and rather pathetic waltz; on another Kuryokhin satirizes traditions of popular Soviet entertainment while Chekasin dismantles standards like "Misty" and "Bye Bye Blackbird" with a disdain for sentiment and nostalgia that would make Camus cringe. Yet one never senses melancholy or despair amidst this cultural dissection. Rather it seems a passionate importuning by two vital artists to move beyond the lethargy of everyday existence; and judging from the reactions of their audience, Kuryokhin and Chekasin have effectively driven their points home.

Whether the music of the Russian jazz avant-garde will eventually rank among the more important musical developments of our time remains to be seen; ultimately, I suspect that its spiritual significance will prove more profound. It is not so much the revelation that "free" music can grow and flourish in an atmosphere of repression and subjugation—the history of jazz in this country should have already taught us that much. Rather it's the lesson of how imagination and strength of character can transcend, and thus transform one's environment. It is the reminder that, beneath the weight of two intractable political systems whose reptilian insistence on seeing each other solely as mirrors for the reflection of their own virtue threatens to send us all to hell in a fireball, lies a commonality of souls, of dreams, and of destiny. And it is the story, already told across centuries, that spirit can be made manifest through music. ■

