

# Jazz a sign of change in Russia

It's a small, intimate venue, maybe 30 seats. The Jazz Philharmonic Hall in St. Petersburg has a big venue for the stars who come to town, but the Ellington Room is my favorite spot. Quiet, cozy, and jam sessions every Tuesday night.

It's amazing how popular jazz is here. Sure, St. Petersburg is a city of over a million people, so there's bound to be some fans, but I never thought of jazz as a Russian passion. Most of my friends, however, know where all the good clubs are, and the Jazz Philharmonic Hall is a source of civic pride.

This is all so fascinating because it's a complete turnaround from Soviet policy. Jazz used to be dangerous for Russians to listen to. It symbolized everything the Soviets feared about America. Now Russian all music schools offer jazz programs. Unbelievable.

The open embracing of jazz is, I think, part of Russia's attempt to deal with its past. There's a wonderful film that opened soon after I arrived here: "Stilyagi," roughly translated as "Stylish People." It was a derisive term, used to describe a counter-cultural, pro-American movement during the Khrushchev era. Stilyagi men wore zoot suits and slicked back their hair. Stilyagi women wore fishnets and piled their hair high.

Most importantly, Stilyagi loved jazz.

They played jazz, listened to jazz, and danced to jazz, all on illegal recordings made on old X-rays that wouldn't look like records if the authorities raided their homes.

"Stilyagi" has a sweet story, musical



OPINION

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COLUMNIST

numbers from Russia's top musicians, and a big finish that encourages Russia to celebrate some level of personal diversity. You gotta give 'em credit for trying.

I think about all this as I listen to the jam.

From the first few notes, it's clear I'm not in the same league with these guys. Their playing is effortless.

They improvise as easily as they breathe, and they swing like nobody's business. But I don't care. I've been talking to the musicians for an hour or so. Being an American who speaks Russian and knows a little about jazz has given me some sort of cache' here. I think I can pull it off.

I ask the pianist if I can join the jam. He enthusiastically offers me his seat. I call the tune, my prerogative as guest. The bass player nods to indicate he knows it, and confirms the key we'll play it in. I make eye contact with the drummer. He hasn't yet said a word to me, but I figure it's now or never. I snap my fingers a few times, and we're off.

It's great to play with pros. I fly along with the bass player and drummer, touching ground here and there to fill out the harmonies in what seems right to me.

The bass player makes it easy to hear where the piece is going, and the drummer lays down a beat that is disciplined but full of swing. I don't have to think about anything. I can just play.

My turn comes around to solo, and I think I do all right. As I hand off the chorus to the bass player, I cut my comping back to a minimum so the audience can hear. When we start to trade fours, I think, "Well, this is it. I'm jamming in St. Petersburg's Ellington Room. Anything else good that happens in my life I'll just be grateful for."

I hand over my seat to the next pianist. She, like all the local musicians, is far better than I am. She accompanies a vocalist on one of the most beautiful ballads ever written, Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark."

It's very sweet to hear Russian vocalists sing jazz standards. Even though their English isn't the greatest and they may not always understand the words, it's obvious they love the music.

My favorite scene in "Stilyagi" reminds me of this. The hero is learning to play the sax so he can win the girl of his dreams. He's imagining he's on a balcony in New York, and there's a fade back to the New York skyline.

Lots of night lights on Broadway, the kind of scene you see in American films all the time. What makes this one different are the glowing blue letters: "ETHEL WATERS SIGNS GERSHWIN"

This doesn't bother me at all. In the blue incandescent alphabet, I see love letters to America.

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