

The

Inside

- 15 / Portland Jazz Festival
- 16 / Myra Melford
- 17 / European Scene
- 18 / Newport Beach Jazz Party

Beat

Keeping Jazz Robust in Moscow

With eyes shut, a visitor to the jam session at Esse Jazz Cafe during the wee hours of Feb. 24 might have imagined himself in the cozy basement confines of Smalls in Manhattan—rather than a loft-like space with large windows on Pyatnitskaya Street in Moscow. Pianist Yakov Okun performed and served as emcee for the proceedings, dedicated to the memory of Stanislav Grigoriev (1938–2001), a tenor saxophonist whose scant YouTube clips reveal an elegant style refracting elements drawn from Dexter Gordon, Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster.

Several of Grigoriev's generational contemporaries were on hand, drinking vodka at a table by the bandstand, but a still-sober cohort included trumpeter Victor Guseinov, a clarion-toned player with a tonal personality not far removed from the Muscovite ex-Jazz Messenger Valery Ponomarev. Also on the bandstand was Okun's father, pianist Mikhail Okun, 68, who navigated two Thelonious Monk tunes with high harmonic knowledge.

It was late, and other pianists were in queue, so the younger Okun played only a single solo on "Hot House." His regular trio mates, bassist Matar Novikov and drummer Alexander "Sasha" Mashin, swung hard for the elder Okun and for Sergey Golovnya, a 30-something tenor saxophonist with a conversational way of phrasing.

Also on site were a pair of internationally known figures: saxophonist-bandleader Igor Butman and trumpeter Terence Blanchard, in Russia to perform with his E-Collective band at Butman's Triumph of Jazz Festival during the weekend. Earlier that evening, Blanchard had served as guest soloist with Butman's Moscow Jazz Orchestra at Spaso House, the palatial residence of the U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation.

Okun, 42, and Butman, 53, share a history. Okun's career began in Moscow after graduating from Gnessin State Musical College in 1992, when Butman—who had emigrated to the United States in 1987 to attend Berklee College of Music—was still living in New York, accumulating sideman credits with Grover Washington, Rachel Z, the

Pianist Nikolai Levinovsky (left), Moscow Jazz Orchestra bandleader Igor Butman, bassist Vitaly Solomonov and guest saxophonist Bob Mintzer perform on Feb. 21 in Moscow.



Lionel Hampton Big Band, Billy Taylor and Eddie Gomez, among others.

"It was a hard period to be a jazz musician," Okun recalled of the wild post-glasnost milieu. "Good musicians had to play in restaurants—Russian and European dance music or American popular music like Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York' or 'Strangers In The Night.' Gangsters wanted to hear what was in the American mafia movies, and you could earn a lot of money. My father had a lot of gigs, and I'd fill in when he overbooked, with singers or shows with dancers. He told me to play the old Soviet songs, and not only lines from McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock. 'That's the way to play the real music,' he said. 'After you learn harmony and rhythm, you go back to playing by ear, as you did at the beginning.'"

Butman already had a Russian fan base who knew him as the lead alto saxophonist in Oleg Lundstrem's first-rate big band and as tenor saxophonist with pianist Nikolai Levinovsky's fusion-

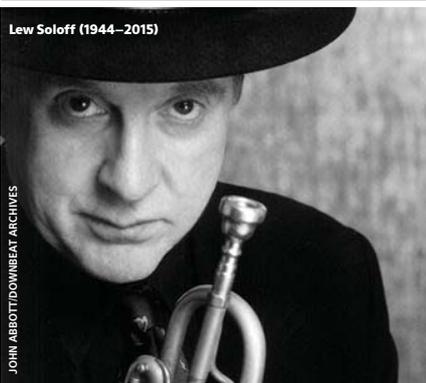
to-postbop unit Allegro during the waning years of the Soviet Union. He returned for a gig with Gomez in 1993, then another, then another, and relocated for good in 1996. He formed a quartet with Okun (whose own c.v. includes engagements in Europe and Russia with the likes of Johnny Griffin, Lew Tabackin, Eddie Henderson, Mark Turner and Donny McCaslin). Butman's star quickly ascended, by dint of exemplary musicianship, keen business skills and an inclusive personality that facilitated friendships among the various strata of society that came to hear him.

By 1999, Butman had co-founded Le Club and formed a big band, which played there on Monday nights. That year, Wynton Marsalis dropped by the venue after a Moscow concert with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, and sat in until 4 a.m. In 2003, Marsalis brought Butman's band to New York for a "battle of the bands" concert with LCJO. By then, Butman had played a state dinner at the Kremlin for President Bill Clinton,

Riffs >

Lew Soloff (1944–2015)

JOHN ABBOTT/DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES



In Memorium: Lew Soloff, whose career as a distinguished jazz trumpeter spanned some 50 years, died March 8 from an apparent heart attack in New York City. He was 71. Best known for his stint in the jazz-rock band Blood, Sweat & Tears from 1968 to 1973, Soloff was a consummate fixture on the New York scene. He shared a long association with Gil Evans, and he made significant contributions to big bands and large ensembles led by George Gruntz, Carla Bley and David Matthews, as well as the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. His own groups included Lew Soloff and the Afro Cuban Ensemble and the Lew Soloff Quartet.

Global Victory: The Eden Rabin International Project—a collective of musicians from Israel, Chile, Germany and the United States—has won the 2014 Made In New York Jazz Competition. Second place was awarded to vocalist Thana Alexa from the United States, and third place went to German saxophonist Jan Prax's quartet. The culminating gala event of the second-annual competition will take place June 27 at the Tribeca Performing Arts Complex.

More info: madeinnyjazz.com

Blues Emergence: Dan Aykroyd and Judy Belushi-Pisano, widow of actor John Belushi, have announced the creation of Blues Brothers Records, a label dedicated to the development of blues artists that will be distributed by Blue Note Records. **More info:** bluenote.com

Final Bar: Orrin Keepnews, journalist, record label executive and producer of classic jazz albums, died March 1 in El Cerrito, California. He was 91. An NEA Jazz Master who won four Grammys, Keepnews was also a distinguished producer of reissued jazz recordings who was admired for his incisive and extensively detailed liner notes. Labels he founded or co-founded include Riverside, Milestone and Landmark; Keepnews also headed jazz activities at Fantasy from 1972 to 1980. Late in his career, Keepnews remained involved in the industry by working on CD reissues and remastered compilations, including a 24-disc Duke Ellington RCA box set and the acclaimed "Keepnews Collection" of material originally issued on Riverside.

who famously described him as his favorite saxophonist, and another concert for an audience that included Mikhail Kasyanov (then Prime Minister), President Vladimir Putin's Chief of Staff Alexander Voloshin, and Putin's ideologist Vladislav Surkov, all subsequent friends. Butman's popularity exploded in 2006, when he participated in *Stars On Ice*, a televised figure-skating competition on Channel One, owned by the late Boris Berezovsky, whose Triumph Foundation launched the Triumph of Jazz Festival in 2000.

Today Butman oversees two namesake jazz clubs in Moscow; his band is the Moscow State Jazz Orchestra, a 365-day-a-year outfit that pays full salary to 17 members plus Levinovsky as arranger and sometime pianist. Funding comes partly from the state, partly from gigs by both the orchestra and Butman's quartet and partly from friends like American investment banker Andrew Intrater, who has sponsored four MSJO tours of the United States in recent years.

On Feb. 23 at the Igor Butman Jazz Club at Taganka, a pair of hour-long sets addressed a range of styles, propelled by impeccably executed grooves from bassist Vitaly Solomonov and drummer Edward Zizak and illuminated by individualistic solos from most of MSJO's personnel.

One was a forceful declamation on John Coltrane's "Blues Minor" by trombonist Pavel Ovchinnikov, 40, a native of Nevinnomyssk, a city in southern Russia. The next day, before the Spaso House concert, Ovchinnikov recalled learning to love jazz from his bassist father's record collection—Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins, a Ben Webster anthology, sides by Louis Armstrong. He moved to Moscow in 1999, after earning a position in a production of *Chicago*, then took a position in George Garanian's touring big band in Krasnodar, 300 kilometers west of his home town, before joining Butman in 2004.

"There were a lot of small groups, not so many trombone players, and I could improvise," Ovchinnikov explained of his quick acceptance on the Moscow scene. "Now, I think every musician can find people to cooperate with and play whatever style they want. The audience also comes from a full spectrum, a mix of older and younger."

After the Spaso House concert, Zizak, 43, discussed his jazz education. Born in Sevastopol, he began playing drums at 6 in his saxophonist father's dance band. In 1988, he enrolled at Gnessim, where classmate Yakov Okun helped him crack the codes of swing. He spent three years in a big band led by educator Anatoly Kroll, several of whose alumni now play with Butman, before joining Butman's quartet, and then his big band.

"We played interesting arrangements by Vitaly Dolgov," Zizak said, referencing Butman's first collaborator, who died in 2007. "They remind me of the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Big Band. We try to follow the rules of the genre, but each of us brings his own feeling. I think Igor is the reason we can do this."

Butman interjected: "Wynton showed me that it's possible to have a band like this, but I wasn't thinking about how he does it when I assembled it. I want to be able to see in their eyes that they love jazz. Then we can work—and they need a lot of a work. I try to give everyone a solo, a spot in the



Igor Butman is a celebrated musician and club owner.

VLADIMIR KORBITSYN

show, so they all feel like they're an artist. One guy goes deeper through the changes, another will like more flashy things, and so on."

In this regard, he works hand-in-glove with Levinovsky, 70, as evidenced by the big band's exceptional albums in recent years. Levinovsky amalgamates influences drawn from—among others—Thad Jones, Quincy Jones and Gil Evans in his poetic arrangements of "Caravan," two Russian folk songs and the four movements of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Sheherazade" on the MSJO's 2013 disc *Sheherazade's Tales* (Butman Music). His compositions provide some of the many highlights on the MSJO's 2009 date *Moscow @ 3 A.M.*, which features Marsalis on three tracks.

"I am writing for musicians I know well, and I can imagine how each guy will sound as I'm writing," said Levinovsky, who emigrated to the States in 1990 and joined the MSJO full-time after Dolgov died. "They are all knowledgeable, seasoned improvisers who can impart their own understanding of the music."

Levinovsky mentioned MSJO's 23-year-old lead alto saxophonist, Ilya Morozov, and 25-year-old tenor saxophonist Azat Bayazitov as emblematic of Russia's indigenous pool of talent. "We play at jazz festivals, local ones in Siberia, Rostov, St. Petersburg, Riga, Sochi," he said. "We hear young, talented players in the provincial or remote areas who know how to play blues, know the Parker, Coltrane and Monk tunes. With the Internet, they can click on YouTube and hear anything they want."

He also mentioned Butman's pragmatic equipoise between artistic imperatives and audience inclusion. "Igor is good at picking up a vibe from the audience and applying the music to them," he remarked. "That's his job as a bandleader. Forty years ago, when the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra played in Moscow, Thad didn't play easygoing music or shitty charts. He did serious repertoire, with little stage tricks—changing tempo, introducing different soloists—to please the audience. Igor is that kind of bandleader."

It's one of several reasons for the Butman phenomenon, as Yakov Okun had acknowledged. "Jazz music in Moscow is not an art form at which you can make real money," he said. "But a couple of our musicians have made a business of this, and Igor is the first of them—an unbelievable businessman. Also, he can really play, and I enjoy him."

—Ted Panken