

THE ENGINE ROOM BACK FROM THE SOVIET UNION

by Gail Brennan/John Clare

[This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on December 16, 1989. A report by Eric Myers, who accompanied the tour, "The Engine Room in the Soviet Union" is available on this site at the link

[https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/essays/.](https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/essays/)]

John Pochée, Roger Frampton and Steve Elphick have played in a number of countries — including India, Poland, Britain and the United States — but something happened to them during their three weeks in the Soviet Union that left them in a state more closely resembling shell shock than jet lag. Three days after their return last week, I spoke to Elphick. "It was very hard," he said. Was it good?

"Fantastic", he said quietly. His eyes wandered.

It should be made clear that neither the three musicians — who visited the Soviet Union as the trio The Engine Room — nor the enthusiasts who invited them (the Soviet Jazz Federation) saw their tour as a mission on behalf of American jazz or the American way. Though they all may have had American jazz musicians as initial role models, they have developed distinctive, instantly recognisable approaches, individually and collectively. The same can be said of the many distinguished Soviet jazz musicians.

As bassist Elphick said: "There was a time when Russian officialdom saw the music as a symbol of American decadence, while the Americans saw it as something that communists listened to."



The Engine Room L-R, John Pochée, Steve Elphick and Roger Frampton: the hospitality was so overwhelming...

In fact, there are many remarkable parallels in the way the Soviet and American establishments have viewed jazz. Once a style of jazz has been around long enough, the Americans have been happy to cite it as part of their heritage, along with maple syrup, apple pies and white picket fences (never mind that it may have come from the wrong side of the tracks). Similarly, Soviet authorities have often brutally repressed certain forms of jazz (the very word was forbidden at the height of Stalinism) until they have been around long enough to be condoned as subjects of harmless, scholarly interest.

Let a radical new form emerge and the official view in both countries has been that the practitioners are antisocial types, if not dangerous lunatics. This process is described in detail in *Russian Jazz: New Identity*, edited by Leo Feigin (Quartet Books). It would seem that jazz has more often represented dissent and free expression in a universal sense than it has symbolised a specifically American Shangri-la. This has been confirmed to me by Soviet emigre Eduard Bronson, a tenor saxophone virtuoso who arrived in Australia in the early 1970s (when many Soviet jazz musicians were given the option of leaving) to become a founder member of the improvisation group Free Kata.



Soviet expatriate saxophonist Eduard Bronson, who arrived in Australia in the early 1970s...

In the present climate, as far as the touring Australians could make out, all the ideological baggage has been thrown out, and rock, which was briefly the new bogey, is also embraced.

Pochée said: "We played at the Leningrad Jazz Festival, also called Autumn Rhythms, and at midnight a series of performances began that had some rather bizarre visual elements. In one, a drag queen who looked like Marilyn Monroe just stood there for some time while her dress slowly fell down to reveal her breasts. There were bands with punk rock rhythm sections, and one musician who spent quite a while measuring the stage. The first hour of all this was shown on national television."

Said Elphick: "Culture on all levels is incredibly important to them. You hear long, modern classical works on the radio — I mean music that is really right out there."

"They are very proud of their culture," said drummer Pochée, "and just wonderfully open to anything you might do. We never felt any obligation to play other than the way we wanted to play, and I don't think it unfair to say they probably listen more deeply than Australian audiences. They're not interested in who's better than whom, they just want to hear what you do. And they would analyse it. They would come up and say, as best they could, what they heard in it - that they heard freedom, fun."

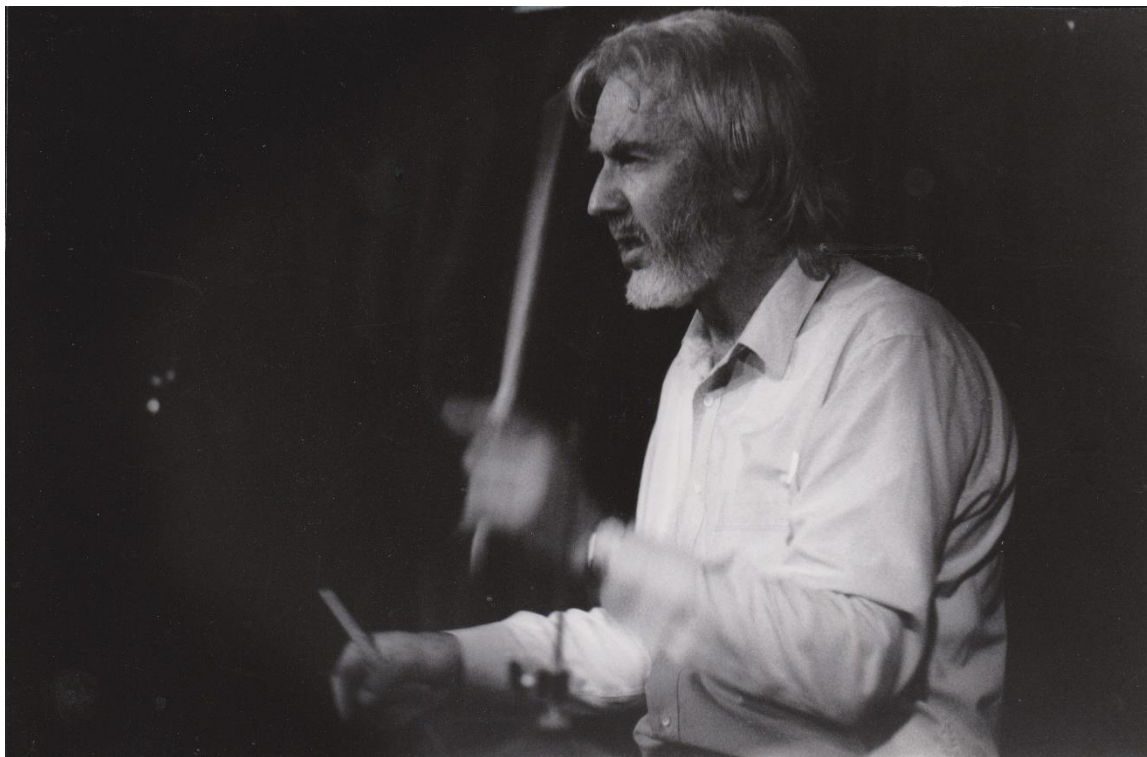


Roger Frampton on alto saxophone in Moscow: he was very big potatoes in Russia...PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS

"They are," Pochée added suddenly, "the most loving people I have ever encountered. Many times it was hard not to burst in to tears. I finished playing one night, and as I stood up from the drums, sweat running off me, this boy came up to me and gave me a drawing he'd just done, and I looked at it and that was what I had just played! Oh, they loved Roger. Roger was very big potatoes in Russia."

Pianist and saxophonist Frampton said: "They have a lot of freely improvising duos and solo artists, but their full bands tend to have more composition and less improvisation than ours."

"They were also fascinated with the way I play the drums," Pochée said. All the drummers wanted their photos taken with me. One drummer came up to me and he said, 'I see you ... ' and he made as if he was fluttering all over the cymbals, 'and I think: artist!' The whole thing just confirmed my faith in what I do, that I have something of my own."



Pochée: confirming my faith in what I do, that I have something of my own...
PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE

"One of the most important things for me," said Elphick, "was that people identified what we play as music from Australia rather than copies of American jazz. And it was very encouraging to be told that our technical standards were so high, when many of them start at that level, having had classical training."

Frampton said: "We have musicians here, as they do, who have always tried to play like themselves, and it's very encouraging when people tell you that they hear that. It confirmed to me that it's worth aiming to play overseas. It made me confident that it's worthwhile, that we have something to offer, rather than just proving we can do it."

But what was so hard about it all? Frampton said: "Psychologically and physically, it was very gruelling. Very gruelling and very exhilarating. There were the overnight train journeys with very little room to sleep. Then you'd have two or more performances the next day, and we were expected to hang around afterwards and jam with students and local musicians, and the hospitality was so overwhelming it was hard to get any sleep at all."

Especially, Pochée said, "when you had people coming into your room, saying 'John, no sleep, drink!' There would be three of us sleeping in a very small room. Their apartments are very smart, but very small, and they use space ingeniously. The schedule kept changing every day. Our interpreters, who were just marvellous, were volunteers who could speak very little English. They had very little resources and they did the very best they could for us, and we gave our very best for them. Incidentally, we were filmed and televised. We will have a 20-minute spot in a long TV feature on Australia."

Elphick said: "We saw a photo of us on the front page of a paper and we asked what it said. It was, 'Australian koalas conquer Russian bear'!"



In Leningrad, 1989: L-R, John Pochée, interpreter Dima, Steve Elphick, Roger Frampton...PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS

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