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## To Russia without Love: The Benny Goodman Tour of the USSR Part I

by Bill Crow

*I want to thank my colleagues on the tour who provided me with their recollections of the experience, especially Turk Van Lake, who let me read and extract from a manuscript he prepared shortly after it.*

NEW YORK, AUGUST 1986

Benny Goodman was probably the world's best-known jazz musician. The average person thought of him as "The King of Swing," master of both hot jazz and classical music, a statesmanlike bandleader who traveled the world as Musical Ambassador of Good Will for the United States. Among jazz fans, he was also known as the first white bandleader to break the color bar when in the 1930s he hired Teddy Wilson, Charlie Christian, and Lionel Hampton. His playing, his bands, and his recordings were always first class and countless musicians found their careers established, or placed on firmer footing, because Benny hired them.

Insiders in the business knew other aspects of his personality. Whenever veterans of Goodman's bands find themselves working together, they tell stories about him, either to marvel once again at his paradoxical nature or to exorcise with laughter the traumas of having worked for him. Musicians who were with him in 1936 swap similar stories with musicians who worked for him in 1986, the last year of his life.

We laugh because they are about a man we expected to be lovable because we loved his music. The stories may sound exaggerated to anyone who never dealt directly with Benny. Like pratfalls in a Laurel and Hardy film, they're funny as long as nobody really gets hurt. But when they're happening to you, they hurt. Benny apparently did something to insult, offend or bewilder nearly everyone who ever worked for him. He put together some wonderful bands, but he had a reputation for spoiling the fun. During my brief time with him, I watched him completely demoralize an excellent band.

Around April 1962 I got a call from Jay Finegold, Benny's manager. "Benny's taking a band to Russia for six weeks, with a break-in tour out to the Seattle World's Fair. He'd like you to make it, if we can agree on the money. How much would you need?"

This was the first actual job Benny had offered me. About a year earlier Jay had called to say Benny wanted me to come up to Lynn Oliver's rehearsal studio for a couple of hours one afternoon. At the studio I found John Bunch, who had

recommended me to Benny, and a couple of young drummers I hadn't met before.

Benny and Jay came in. Benny, tall and reserved, was comfortably dressed in an old cardigan sweater. Jay, half his size, could have been mistaken for an eager-to-please nephew. A tidily dressed, handsome young man, he seemed to be everywhere at once, getting Benny a chair, handing him his clarinet case, making sure we were set up the way Benny wanted.

John introduced us, Benny got out his clarinet, got a reed working, and called a tune. The rhythm section fell in behind him and he began to play, smoothly and beautifully, with the effortless control of his instrument that I had always admired. After a couple of choruses he waved us out and called another tune. It went on like that for a while. He'd call an old tune, play a chorus, and stop us. Wondering if he were testing us to see if we knew old tunes, I suggested some of the ones I knew, like *He's A Gypsy From Poughkeepsie* and *From the Indies to the Andes in his Undies*. He gave me a suspicious look and I decided maybe I didn't know him well enough yet to make jokes.

We played for an hour or so and then Benny said, "Okay, boys, I guess that's it," packed up his horn and left. Nobody mentioned any work, so I said goodbye to John and went home.

I called Jay a few weeks later and told him I hadn't received a check for the rehearsal.

"Rehearsal?" said Jay. "Oh, no, Bill. That was just a jam session." I told him I was used to being invited to jam sessions. When somebody calls and tells me to show up, I assume it's business. I never got paid, so I guess it was a jam session.

I wish I had known. I would have taken a chorus.

At the time Jay called about the Russian tour, I had been making \$300 a week with Gerry Mulligan whenever he had work for his quartet, and \$225 when he booked his big band. Jobs in Europe paid more. I wanted to see Russia but I also wanted a fair salary, and I had no idea what to ask for. Gerry had always given us a fair share of whatever he was making, so I had never felt the need to bargain with him. But everyone who had worked for Benny told me he would try to pay you as little as he could. I asked Jay for \$300 a week. He said he'd speak to Benny and get back to me.

He called the next day to say that \$300 was okay but Benny would have to have any recordings made on the tour for nothing. I didn't know that such an arrangement violated union rules, so I accepted. Mel Lewis told me later that Benny did the same thing to him, but Mel got more money out of him. My salary turned out to be at the low end of the scale on the band, though I had expected that when I heard the lineup. The band was loaded with talent and experience. Some of the guys made twice as much as I did. Jim Maxwell tells me he got \$1000 a week, but his was a special case.

Before we left, Jay told some of the higher salaried guys that the State Department insisted they take cuts. Joe Wilder had been hired for \$600, and would come down only to \$550. Reductions were agreed to by a few others. When we got to Moscow, these guys descended on Terry Catherman, a cultural attache from the U.S. embassy, to ask why the State Department had found it necessary to demand the salary cuts.

"I don't know anything about it," said Terry. "We pay Mr. Goodman a lump sum."

Before I was hired, I had read an article in the *New York Times* announcing the Russian tour. It said that twelve musicians had already been signed, with one trombonist, at least two trumpeters and a bass player yet to be chosen. It sounded like a very good band: John Bunch on piano, Gene Allen on baritone sax, Jerry Dodgion and Phil Woods on altos, Oliver Nelson and Zoot Sims on tenors, Jimmy Knepper and Willie Dennis on trombones, John Frosk on trumpet, Mel Lewis on drums, Jimmy Raney on guitar. Joya Sherrill was to be the featured vocalist.

The article said that Benny was "expected to perform with his fifteen-piece band, and to conduct Soviet symphony orchestras on the tour." Nat Hentoff was quoted as saying, "The prevailing composition of the band is young and modern. An interesting question is how (Goodman) will adapt his style to this group."

The *Times* said that some people felt Duke Ellington should have been the first American jazz band to make an official tour of Russia, and that Benny had offered Duke a couple of weeks on the trip as guest soloist, but Duke hadn't accepted. A later *Times* article quoted Benny as saying he would play "jazz, chamber music and some classical works" but that the prime purpose of the tour was to present "an anthology of American jazz" to the Russians.

Benny tried out several drummers before he finally hired Mel Lewis. John Bunch, who had been helping Benny assemble the band, advised him to hire me as well, since Mel and I had worked well together on Gerry Mulligan's band.

Mel was known as "The Tailor" on Gerry's band. It was a sobriquet he had brought with him from Los Angeles, and I had heard speculation about its origin. Some people thought it meant he "suited" the band well, "custom fitting" his rhythmic patterns to the music, "stitching" the time skillfully together. Actually, Terry Gibbs hung the name on him, simply because "he looks like my tailor." Mel's appearance is deceptive. A soft, round man with a dreamy expression and a flatfooted walk that reminds one of a delicatessen waiter, he doesn't fit the image of the hot jazz drummer that Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich established. But then, neither did Dave Tough or Tiny Kahn.

Rehearsals began on April 14. When I joined the band soon afterward, I discovered a few changes in the lineup the *Times* had announced. John Bunch played some of the rehearsals but Teddy Wilson was to make the tour. Tom Newsom had replaced Oliver Nelson after Oliver left to write a movie score. Jimmy Raney had quit and Turk Van Lake was taking his place at rehearsals. Jay hired Turk from day to day and didn't tell him he was to make the tour until shortly before we left New York.

Turk's Armenian name is Vanig Hovsepian. His father came from a part of Armenia that is now in Turkey, near Lake Van, hence his American name. A small, slender man with jet black

hair brushed straight back from a broad forehead, he sat wrapped around his guitar, the point of his chin buried in his shirtfront, his slender fingers manipulating the strings with the quick deftness of a raccoon washing an apple. Turk played acoustic rhythm guitar a la Freddy Green. Since I had been working with Mulligan's pianoless groups for quite a while, the four-man rhythm section format was a big change for me and I enjoyed figuring out the best way to play with it.

The sax section was superb. Gene Allen, a dark, genial man who wouldn't look out of place in a George Price cartoon, anchored it with his strong subtle baritone. There were also bass clarinet parts in the book, a double that Gene handled well. Tom Newsom was a fine section tenor player with a laid-back country boy manner that fitted well with Zoot Sims' carefree style. Phil Woods, strong and definite by nature, played great lead alto and clarinet, and Jerry Dodgion, merry as a chickadee, matched his sound perfectly on third alto. They were all good soloists, and Zoot and Phil were in a class by themselves.

The trumpet section wasn't set until half-way through the rehearsal period. Several different trumpeters passed through, including Clark Terry, Jerry Tyre, and a Yugoslavian trumpet player Willie Dennis brought down from Berklee. Clark was offered the tour but he had been advised by his doctor not to fly for a while and turned it down. Jim Maxwell, Joe Wilder and Joe Newman became the final choices for the open spots in the trumpet section and Wayne Andre joined the trombones.

John Frosk and Maxwell were equally powerful players, though John was only half Jimmy's size. Walking together, they looked like a polar bear and cub. They had both played lead for Benny in the past, and could contribute good jazz choruses when called upon to do so. Joe Wilder, an ex-marine with a welterweight's physique, also played good lead, and was an imaginative soloist with a unique, lovely sound. Joe Newman, whose slight frame is deceptive, was a fountain of swinging energy in the section, and turned his trumpet into a blowtorch on his solos.

Dark-eyed handsome Willie Dennis was a very strong soloist, and Wayne Andre, calm and introspective, had a singing tone and sparkling technique. Jimmy Knepper, a sweet soft-spoken man who seems to have been molded out of Play-Doh by an eight-year-old, was a good lead player and a great soloist.

Jimmy had made only a couple of rehearsals when he came down with mumps. Jay hired subs to cover him — Jack Satterfield, Eddie Bert, Tyree Glenn, and Jim Winter were there at one time or another. Mumps shots were given to members who weren't sure they'd had the disease or shots. Jay would check with Knepper every day to see if he was well enough to come back to work, but when Jimmy got the okay from his doctor and called Jay, he was told, "Forget it, Benny has replaced you." Jim Winter made the trip to Seattle with us.

Jim Maxwell, who was making a good salary at NBC playing the Perry Como show, didn't want to go to Russia. His personal relationship with Benny had been a long one. Jim was grateful to Benny for establishing him in the music business, their families were friendly, and Benny seemed fond of Jimmy's son David. Benny told Jim that it was essential that he be his lead man on this tour, and kept raising the salary offer.

When Jim said no to \$1000 a week, Benny tried pressure. Jimmy got a call from one of the head men at NBC telling him he could have the time off, and was to go. Then someone from the State Department called, telling him it was his patriotic duty to make the trip.

Jimmy said, "I take care of my patriotic duty by paying my income tax."

The man from State said, "Yes, and we can look into that, too."

When Benny called again, Jim was still reluctant.

"I don't like to leave my family," Jim said.

"Bring them along," said Benny.

"My wife works, and my daughter has already planned her summer," said Jim.

"Well, bring David along. He can be the band boy. It will be a great experience for him."

David, just out of high school, was eager to go. So Jim, deciding it might be his last chance to do something with his son before sending him off to college, finally agreed to make the tour for \$1000 a week, and to bring David along as band boy. At one of the first rehearsals Benny showed David how he wanted the band set up, and Mel showed him how to assemble the drum set.

In Seattle Benny changed his mind. He had a friendly talk with Jimmy, and told him that he was getting too old to play lead. He said, "Why don't you take it easy, play fourth, play a little jazz, and enjoy the trip?" He divided most of the first parts between John Frosk and Joe Wilder. Maxwell was surely the most expensive fourth trumpet player Benny ever carried.

David Maxwell probably got more out of the trip than any of us. He became so interested in the Soviet Union during the tour that he majored in Russian when he got to college and went back to study for a year at the University of Moscow. (He is now Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Tufts.) David was never given any specific duties as band boy, but he was helpful and good company, and we were glad to have him along.

In addition to the musicians, the first rehearsals were aswarm with ancillaries — State Department officials, reporters, Benny's staff people, producer George Avakian from RCA Victor, an NBC-TV crew, arrangers with new material, various friends, well-wishers and hangers-out, and Benny's greatest fan, Sol Yaged.

For years Sol had idolized Benny, played like him, dressed like him, stood the way Benny stood, talked the way Benny talked. Someone told me he once even heard Sol call his own wife "Alice." He had made such a study of Benny that he was the natural choice to coach Steve Allen, who portrayed Benny in the Hollywood fantasy, *The Benny Goodman Story*. Sol came to all our rehearsals and sat there with the happy expression of a kid from a sand-lot team who has been allowed to sit on the Yankee bench.

Eddie Sauter attended one rehearsal. We played him an old arrangement that he didn't remember writing. We also rehearsed *Mission to Moscow*, written twenty years earlier by Mel Powell, who took the title from a book by Joseph Davies, former ambassador to Moscow.

Benny had a stack of new arrangements from several of the good writers around New York. Bob Prince had written a number called *Meet the Band* that introduced us individually

and by section, and an *Anthology of Jazz*, a medley of tunes identified with Louis Armstrong, Paul Whiteman, Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Dave Brubeck and Count Basie. Ralph Burns, Al Cohn, Jimmy Knepper and Joe Lipman had done charts for Joya, and there were instrumentals by Bob Brookmeyer, Bobby Bryant, John Bunch, Johnny Carisi, Tadd Dameron, Joe Lipman, Gary McFarland, Oliver Nelson and Tom Newsom.

The only new piece that Benny rejected outright was a Third Stream composition that Gunther Schuller brought in, but a lot of the charts that he accepted didn't make it as far as Russia. What he did use appeared on the concerts less and less as the tour progressed. Benny felt more sure of himself on his older numbers like *Bugle Call Rag*, *Down South Camp Meeting*, *Bach Goes To Town*, etc. At times when the band began to roar on the new charts, he seemed a little overwhelmed. I think he felt threatened by our collective spirit. We knew how this music went better than he did, and I think the realization of this upset him.

We played Benny's older things well, and we liked some of them a lot. None of us had expected *not* to be playing the arrangements that had made him famous. But the new stuff was challenging and satisfying, and at the beginning we were led to believe that the identity of this particular Goodman band would be built on the new material. We had rehearsed it all thoroughly in New York and had it sounding good. When Benny went back into his early book during the tour, many of us were sight reading, and there were parts for only five brass.

We never used Brookmeyer's chart on *You Took Advantage of Me*. In rehearsal, Benny had asked Bob for the tempo, then had kicked it off much slower. It didn't work that slow — the figures Bob had written needed a brighter tempo. Mel and I asked Benny to try it faster, but I think he had the song fixed in his mind at a 1936 dance tempo. He gave up on Bob's chart without ever hearing it played right. Too bad. It was charming, and could have been a useful piece of material.

One new chart that Benny seemed to like was written by John Carisi. John called it *The Bulgar, and Other Balkan Type Inventions*. Benny called it *The Vulgar Bulgar*. Johnny had structured it like Benny's old hit, *Sing, Sing, Sing*. He had taken a Bulgarian folk theme, written the first chorus fairly straight, a tom-tom figure over which Benny could play a solo in a minor mode, and a couple of shout choruses to take it out. Benny played well on it, and called it right after the opening theme every night at the Seattle fair.

Sometimes Benny would have Zoot play first on the tom-tom section. One night in Moscow, after Zoot played, Benny pointed to Phil. Phil took a respectable solo, and Benny played last. The next night, when Benny followed the same routine, Phil was ready for him. When Benny gave him the nod, Phil stood up and played a spectacular solo filled with singing and dancing and fireworks. It was one of those rare, inspired performances that takes your breath away. When he finished, the whole band joined the audience in a roar of approval.

As Mel continued the tom-tom beat, Benny made several false starts on his own solo. He eventually funked through something, but he obviously was stunned by Phil's solo. He just couldn't get into his own thing. He probably should have gone straight to the ensemble chorus — anything else was bound to

be an anticlimax. Certainly it was no time to be competitive. In that spot the next night, Benny called his old arrangement of *Bugle Call Rag*, and we never played Carisi's chart again. The concerts were being recorded, but *The Bulgar* wasn't used on Benny's album.

George Avakian said one of the hardest parts of editing the tapes for the album was having to make do with just one or two takes on the new charts. He didn't want the album to be another reprise of Benny's old book. I think Benny ordered all the new arrangements because he didn't want to be called old-fashioned, but when we got to Russia, he began to worry about being too modern for the Russians. I also think he didn't like to have to be reading the new parts onstage. He had the old book memorized.

At many of the concerts, Soviet jazz fans shouted "Zoot! Pheel!" They wanted more solos by the two saxophonists. On the album, on Tom Newsom's *Titter Pipes*, you can hear these cries. George Avakian told me he had trouble getting a clearly audible example of the real thing on tape, so the voices you hear yelling "Zoot!, Pheel!" during their choruses on the record are George and Carl Schindler, the recording engineer. This may be George's first vocal credit.

Our morale was high during the rehearsals in New York. We knew we had a good band, and we were proud to be taking it to Russia. The cold war seemed to be thawing into peaceful co-existence, and everyone considered the Russians' acceptance of our tour to be a sign that Soviet-American relations were improving.

We appeared on *The Bell Telephone Hour* on April 25, before the trumpet section was set. Doc Severinsen and Clark Terry filled in the gaps. Sol Yaged came to the TV studio to watch. Actually, Benny was preoccupied that day and didn't play as well as he'd been playing at the rehearsals, but as I was packing up, Sol came over and said with stars in his eyes, "You sure can see why they call him the King!"

Besides the daily rehearsals, we had a lot to do to get ready for the trip. Benny sent us to Alexander Shields' chic Park Avenue men's boutique to be measured for band uniforms. We needed security clearances, passports, and official briefings from the State Department. Heath Bowman and Tom Tuck, of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, spent an afternoon giving us an idea of what we might expect in the Soviet Union, and they brought a doctor to one of the rehearsals to administer smallpox, tetanus and typhus shots.

The Ukrainian Dance Company was in New York as part of the cultural exchange. We had a special rehearsal in the Grand Ballroom of the Essex House, and the dancers were brought there to meet us. A few of them jitterbugged discreetly for the benefit of the press photographers.

Just before the tour began, we discovered that Benny's secretary, Muriel Zuckerman, planned to pay us in Russia weekly by check. Most of us had families and would have no way of cashing checks in Russia or of sending money home. Muriel, a flinty little lady long associated with Benny, seemed to find our objections to her plan unreasonable. We raised hell, the State Department interceded, and Muriel found she was able to arrange to have advances sent to the families of those of us who requested it.

Benny contacted Clifton Daniel, then head of the Moscow Bureau of the *New York Times*, to ask for any suggestions he might have for cementing relations with the Russians, and cultivating their interest in jazz. Daniel told him that jazz records were hard to get in Russia. He said that if Benny wanted to send him some albums, he would see that they were placed somewhere in a library or a cultural center where the Russian people would have access to them. Benny agreed that this was a good idea, and sent a box of records for Daniel to put into the proper hands. To Daniel's surprise, Benny also sent a bill for the records, which the *Times* eventually paid.

My feelings toward Benny were very positive during the rehearsals. He was a little patronizing and would get on different guys about inconsequential things — he kept trying to get Joe Newman to sit up straighter — but I loved the band, Benny was responsible for having put it together, and I was looking forward to being in on some good music.

Our first job out of New York was a college dance in Chicago, and then we flew to St. Louis for a concert at the Kiel Auditorium.

Benny called my room an hour before the concert and said, "Say, Pops, did you get a chance to look at your part on that Aaron Copeland duet I gave you last week?" I said,

"I looked at it, but we never rehearsed it."

"Oh, there's nothing to it, Pops, we'll try it out tonight."

My heart sank. My part was all arco half notes in the upper register, and knowing Copeland's love of dissonant intervals, I was worried. I had no idea how my part related to the clarinet part, which I'd never heard, and I was not thrilled about sight reading it in front of a couple of thousand people. I asked Benny to wait until we had a chance to rehearse it together. He said something noncommittal and hung up.

Sure enough, after the second number on the concert that night he announced the damned thing, and I suffered through it, feeling trapped and furious. Benny of course had his part memorized. I comforted myself by saying, "Well, at least, now I know what it is." I woodshedded my part, but Benny never played it again while I was with the band.

After St. Louis, we flew to San Francisco, with a stop at Los Angeles airport to pick up vibraphonist Victor Feldman, whom Benny had added for the septet numbers. At the San Francisco concert, Count Basie came backstage to say hello. We were pleased when he told us he liked our rhythm section.

In San Francisco, Joe Newman, my roommate on the tour, took me to the home of his brother, Alvin, for dinner. Joe said his sister-in-law, Lillian, was famous for her cooking. He had once taken some of the Basie band's champion eaters to her table and she had completely wiped them out.

When we walked into her pleasant living room, Lillian, a large, handsome lady, was sitting on the couch with a slippered foot propped up on the coffee table. "Oh, Joe," she wailed. "You brought somebody when I'm having trouble with my foot, and can't do for you properly! You'll just have to take pot luck this time! I haven't felt up to cooking today. All I've got is leftovers!"

What she had "left over" turned out to be half a ham, a pot roast, two kinds of potatoes, beans, greens, vegetables, salad, corn bread, and assorted side dishes that made it look like she

had been cooking for a week. Alvin came home, and we all sat down at the table. Joe and Alvin are both small men, but Joe has always looked trimmed to the bone, with a wiry energy that comes bursting out in his laughter and in his music. His brother was calm and sleek and ate like a man twice his size.

After we had laid waste to the meal, Lillian cheered up a little and made us promise to return when she was feeling better, so she could fix us something more substantial. "Now, you come back any time you're in town," she told me. "You don't have to be with Joe. Just jump in a cab and come right on out."

We opened in Seattle on May 21. We enjoyed being at the fair, and I was especially happy to be playing in my home state. I grew up in Kirkland, across Lake Washington from Seattle, and a lot of my old friends came to the fairgrounds to look me up. Our schedule wasn't heavy, so I had time to explore the fair and the city, which I hadn't visited for years. Some of the guys bought a giant souvenir postcard and sent it to Jim and Andy's bar in New York, covered with signatures and wisecracks. We were having a good time together, but the concerts were starting to be hard work.

Benny had become the bandleader I'd heard all the stories about. He stayed at a different hotel than the rest of us, and we only saw him on the job. His manner became severe — the hard taskmaster. He started fixing things that weren't broken, moving parts around, changing tempos, changing soloists; glaring and snapping at us. Though our ages ranged from 29 to 49, he addressed us as "boys," and Joya was "the girl". His general demeanor indicated that he thought he was, by virtue of being The Great Benny Goodman, superior to us mere mortals.

You can understand someone getting carried away with himself when he is at the peak of popular success. Having thousands of fans cheering every note you play and clamoring for a look at you wherever you go can easily inflate your ego. But it was a long time since Benny had been the superstar he was in the '30s and '40s. In 1962 he held a respected position in the music world, but he should have outgrown any delusions of grandeur he might have contracted from the mass teenage adulation of the Swing Era. And the band didn't subscribe to Benny's special view of himself. We gave him credit for his achievements, and respected his musicianship, but we also respected our own. We wanted to be treated as adults and professionals.

(Benny wanted separate hotels in Russia, too, and when Intourist told him this was not possible, he insisted on at least staying on a different floor than the rest of us. In the dining rooms he and his family always ate at a separate table. This didn't bother us, since Benny wasn't much of a conversationalist,

and he was an untidy eater. But we came down to lunch one day at our hotel in Kiev to find we had been moved to his table for one meal for the benefit of a movie crew he had hired to do some filming for him; we were supposed to pretend to be one big happy family, with Benny in the role of the benevolent father.)

In Seattle, Benny began fiddling with Joya's numbers. He had Bob Prince fly out from New York and write two new charts for her. We used one of them for only two performances. Benny never even had the parts copied out on the other one. He asked Joya if she knew the lyrics to any of the vocal arrangements in his old book. Those charts featured the band, with one vocal chorus.

Joya stopped that idea dead in its tracks: "Mr. Goodman, I have my music, and those are the songs I am going to sing. I was hired as the featured vocalist on this tour. I am not the band singer." That was the beginning of a decided coolness between Benny and Joya.

By the end of the week in Seattle, Teddy Wilson, Maxwell, Joya and a couple of others were getting fed up with Benny, and were talking about quitting.

Mel Lewis told them, "You guys don't understand the Old Man. I get along great with him. He plays his axe, I play my axe, we both do a good job and everything's fine with him. Everybody misunderstands him."

Maxwell laughed. "You tell me that the last week in Moscow," he said.

The State Department prevailed on the dissidents not to leave. They had moved mountains to get Moscow to approve Benny's tour and didn't want to give the Russians any reason to have second thoughts about it.

Benny was good at striking jazzy poses in front of the band, but he was not in good contact with his audiences. He didn't seem comfortable with them, and he did things that confused them. He would raise his hand in preparation for a downbeat, and we'd get set to play, instruments ready, embouchures set, breaths taken . . . and he would stand there with his forefinger raised and his eyes rolled up, waiting. He might have been thinking about the tempo, but who could tell? I timed him once, and it was a forty second wait. That's a lot of dead time on stage. The audience would grow restless, and then there would be shushing by those who thought Benny was waiting for total silence. He would sometimes end these long pauses with a little start, as if he had just awakened from a nap, and then would tap off the tempo.

On one concert, as he was about to start a tune; he noticed that I was chewing gum. He walked over and told me to get rid of it. I stopped chewing, and indicated I was ready to play. He wasn't satisfied. "That's okay, Pops, I'll wait for you," he said. I didn't want to stick it on my music stand, and I wasn't about to make a trip offstage, so I swallowed it and made a face at him, and he went on with the program. His fastidiousness about the chewing gum amused me, since he often hawked and spit right on the stage and would sometimes stand in front of the band absently exploring the depths of a nostril or the rear seam of his trousers with his forefinger. (You could sometimes hear oinking from the band when he'd do these things.) One of Jay Finegold's constant concerns was to make sure Benny didn't walk onstage with his fly open.

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### Notice

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John Frosk had been on the Far East tour with Benny and had taken movies of him picking his nose and scratching his behind in front of the King of Siam. When NBC was preparing a television special on the tour, John mentioned to one of the producers that he had some film, and a motorcycle messenger was sent to his house to pick it up. The producer called John the next day and said, "Are you crazy? We can't use any of that stuff!"

Benny kept bugging the trumpet section. He would move the lead part from one player to another without giving any reason, and take a solo away from one guy and give it to another in a manner that was discourteous, to say the least. He'd wait until Joe Wilder was on his feet ready to play the solo indicated on his part, then would wave him down and point to Joe Newman.

I knew of Benny's reputation for being a perfectionist, but I don't remember him giving us any useful suggestions for improving the music. Everyone was on their mettle to play their best, but we never knew what Benny's standards were. If he was displeased, we found out by having a solo, a part, or an entire arrangement taken away, but he rarely said what it was he didn't like.

Benny didn't acknowledge us as musical colleagues. He acted friendly from time to time, but he always had to remind us that we were the hired help. He deserves a lot of credit for taking John Hammond's good advice in the '30s and integrating his band at a time when white bands were Lily White. But after working for him, I gave him no credit for being a libertarian. He treated everyone like slaves, regardless of race, creed or national origin.

With such a good band, we couldn't understand why Benny didn't just let us play. If he had let us alone, played his solos and taken the bows, the tour would have been a piece of cake for him. Instead, he seemed to be always on his guard against us, as if we had been shanghaied and had to be watched for signs of mutiny. By the end of the tour, most of us felt betrayed and outraged, and Benny had a couple of cases of serious rancor on his hands. Even so, we played a lot of good music. Jerry Dodgion told me later, "No matter what went down with Benny, I had the best seat in the house, right between Zoot and Phil. I was in heaven." We were proud of the band, and couldn't understand why Benny didn't seem to feel that way, too.

We had originally been told we would fly to Moscow from Seattle via the polar route, but in Seattle, Jay told us we were going back to New York first. We stopped again in Chicago, where Benny had a short visit with his mother at the airport, and there was speculation among us that Benny had changed the route just to see her again. But in New York we found John Bunch and Jimmy Knepper waiting at the airport to join us. Benny had decided that Teddy Wilson didn't play modern enough for the band and had hired John, planning to use Teddy on the quintet numbers.

John was rehearsing at Marshall Brown's studio in New York when Benny called him from Seattle. He didn't really want to go to Russia. Charlie Mastropaolo, who had been there with Ed Sullivan, had told him, "It's the awfulest goddamned place I've ever been. If Benny wants you to go, be sure to ask for a lot of money." John did, and Benny stayed on the phone for half an hour, haggling over fifty bucks. The guys from the State Department were pulling their hair out because of the last

minute security clearances they had to get for John and Jimmy Knepper.

When Jimmy had been bumped off the band, he had mentioned his disappointment to a lawyer friend. The lawyer evidently had called Benny in Seattle and told him he was liable for Jimmy's salary. At any rate, Jim got a call from Seattle telling him to meet us at Idlewild. We had some time between flights at the Idlewild Airport but not enough to go anywhere. Everyone made phone calls to say last goodbyes to family and friends. In a private airport lounge, Al Knopf, president of Local 802, and a delegation of union officials gave us a farewell party with music by Bobby Hackett's group.

A Selmer representative brought new saxophones to the airport for Tom Newsom and Gene Allen to use while we were in Russia. Benny wanted the sax section to be playing new Selmers and had already prevailed on Zoot not to bring his old favorite horn, which sounded great but looked exceedingly ratty, the lacquer having long ago peeled away leaving irregular blotches of corrosion and tarnish. Zoot had walked into a store on 48th Street, pointed to a new Selmer, and said, "Give me that one," and bought it without even trying it out. He didn't like it as well as his old favorite, to which he returned when the tour was over. The new one was stolen the following New Years Eve, when he left it in his car in front of Jim and Andy's bar.

Jerry Dodgion already had a new Selmer alto that he had gotten previously while working with Benny in a small group. Jerry had always played a King, but Benny had asked him to switch to a Selmer because they were about to play for a Selmer convention. "I'm a shareholder in the company," he told Jerry, "and it wouldn't look right."

Unlike many other musical instrument companies, Selmer has never provided complimentary instruments to the artists who use them. They do sometimes offer horns on trial, with the understanding that when the artist finds one he likes, he'll buy it. Selmer sent Jerry an alto in time for the convention. Jerry was happy with his old King and, since he was using the Selmer only because Benny wanted him to, he kept ignoring the bills that periodically arrived from Selmer. He finally sent them to Benny and they eventually stopped coming.

The arrival of the new instruments at Idlewild created the problem of what to do with the old ones. Gene Allen and Tommy Newsom decided to take them along. If there were any mishap, a spare horn might come in handy. The Selmer representative had also brought a reed-instrument repair kit.

We were going to be a long way from the repairmen on 48th Street.

The trip from Seattle to Moscow, including the stopover at Idlewild, took about 24 hours. As we left New York we had quite a plane full. There was Benny, his wife Alice and their daughters, Rachel and Benjy, Sophia Duckworth (Alice's daughter), eighteen musicians, Joya, Jay Finegold, Muriel Zuckerman, Hal Davis (Benny's P.R. man), David Maxwell, a television crew from NBC, reporters and photographers and State Department people. SAS gave us the full celebrity treatment on the flight to Copenhagen. There, we changed to a more austere Aeroflot jet and flew on to Moscow. Leonard Feather was not on the plane, but he was at our hotel in Moscow, covered the opening concert, and at the party at the

U.S. embassy afterwards. (Leonard says that when he learned of the tour, he promptly booked a trip to Russia, without even a commitment from a newspaper or magazine to publish his articles. Ed.)

The United States had been through the McCarthy era and, at the time of the tour, Russia loomed large in the American subconscious. I hadn't shared the general anxiety about the Red Menace, but I was still surprised to realize that the evergreens surrounding the Moscow airfield looked just like the trees in my home state. I had been so conscious of Russia as a political entity that I had forgotten it was also a place of trees and grass and birds. And, of course, the people looked just like people. Only the buildings and the clothing looked different, and no stranger than the differences you see traveling from New York to Dallas.

We began to notice and feel oppressed by the socio-political climate in the Soviet Union as we were there longer, but on a human level, I felt a more immediate empathy with the people I met than I had felt in many western European countries. John Frosk said Gene Allen, his roommate, never got over his concern about being in a Communist country. He was sure their room was bugged, and was constantly shushing John. "What if it is bugged?" John would say, "We're not saying anything!" "Ssshh!" Gene would insist.

I had a copy of the Hammond company's Tourist Manual for Russia, full of good information and advice. Among their list of do's and don'ts:

- Bring plenty of film, roll types may be scarce.
- Use a comfortable pair of shoes, there's plenty of walking.
- Bring a sink stopper (universal flat type) seldom available.
- Bring your own soap for best washing.
- Wash and peel all raw fruit before eating.
- Bring special medicines you need, especially for diarrhea.
- Have plenty of paper tissues. They are very useful.
- (Russian toilet paper is slick and crinkly. B.C.)
- Don't:
- Bring in any Soviet currency, it is strictly forbidden.
- Take pictures from planes, trains, or of bridges, etc.
- Expect elevator service down, if less than six floors.
- Take pictures of people without their permission.
- Wear shorts or bathing suit in the streets.
- Drink tap water in the smaller towns.
- Give tips, it may be considered an insult.
- Become exhausted or frustrated. Rest up for a while.
- Lose your patience. Keep a chipper attitude. Avoid arguments.

I reminded myself of the last two items after every concert.

Cultural attache Terry Catherman was a handsome, blond all-American boy. In his regular briefings, he described situations we should avoid that might be used to embarrass the United States, and told us horror stories about reporters and diplomats who had been set up by the KGB in order to create scandals for propaganda purposes. He cautioned us not to go anywhere alone with a Russian, but said his gut feeling was that the heat was off for this tour. He didn't think we would experience any unusual harassment, and he was right.

Terry pointed out the guys in the blue suits who stood in front of Moscow's Leningradskaya Hotel, looking like store detectives. He said they would take note of who talked to us and might even follow us around. I walked a lot by myself and never noticed any of them following me, but some of us were followed. In an attempt to forestall any wild behavior, Terry

kept stressing our roles as ambassadors representing the United States. I thought it amusing that as an ambassador of western democracy I was a member of the least democratic band I'd ever been on.

The language was difficult, not just because the words were new, but also because of the Cyrillic alphabet that is used in Russia, with different sounds for some of the same letters we use. They use a "C" for the "s" sound, and a "B" for the "v" sound, so when they say "Moscva" (Moscow), they write it "MOCKBA." They use "P" for their "r" sound, "H" for their "n" sound, "E" for "ye" and "Y" for "oo." There are other letter symbols, with their own sounds, that were completely new to us. Reading even the simplest sign was difficult. We had to refer to our alphabet charts and slowly sound out each character just to see if it was a Russian word we had heard before. I practiced hard, in order to be able to read street signs and the names of the stations on the subway.

We picked up enough phrases by ear to be able to exchange basic courtesies, and we had our handy Berlitz books, but we were heavily dependent on Felix, Gallia and Tamara, the interpreters provided for us. Felix was a tall, thin, neatly dressed, balding man with a small mustache, wire rimmed glasses, and a bright wit. Tamara, dark, petite and businesslike, seemed to speak with the voice of authority. She served as our tour guide in Moscow and amused us with her party line interpretations of the paintings in the art museum. "Here we see the wicked landowner drinking to assuage his guilt . . . In this painting, notice the steely eyes of the aristocrat and the kind, warm eyes of the peasant woman." The third interpreter, Gallia, a neat attractive brunette, remained in the background.

Tamara stayed in Moscow when we hit the road, replaced by Nadia, a stocky dishwasher blonde with a pleasant smile that revealed a chipped front tooth. Felix was mainly assigned to Benny and the two girls had the rest of us to deal with. Sometimes we couldn't find them, because Benny would send them on errands, like going to the concert hall to straighten out problems with the microphones.

We became friendly with all three interpreters during the tour, even though Terry told us that their job probably included reporting on us to the secret police. Besides interpreting for us, they explained local customs, helped us avoid gaffes, and generally smoothed our way.

Some of us were more charmed than others with life in the Soviet Union. We all criticized the food and the governmental restrictions, but I think most of us enjoyed the people we met. Some of us played jam sessions in local restaurants after the concerts, but nothing stayed open late. There were no night clubs or late movies, so there wasn't much to do at night but read, drink, play cards, and bitch about Benny. After a few weeks, I noticed a psychological exhaustion among us that was probably a combination of the language barrier, homesickness, dysentery, travel weariness, and musical frustration.

I'm an early riser, especially when I'm in a new place. The second day in Moscow I tiptoed out of our room while Joe Newman was still sleeping, and walked around the city for a couple of hours before breakfast. Benny had called a 10 a.m. rehearsal, and breakfast had been announced as available from 8 to 9 a.m., so I timed my walk to get me back just before nine. As I entered the hotel lobby I met a frantic Jay Finegold. "I've

been looking all over for you! Benny wants to rehearse the quintet at nine. The other guys are just leaving for the hall. You've got to get right over there!"

On arriving the day before, we had taken the large instruments over to the Central Army Sports Club, a grandiose place with a marble lobby of crystal chandeliers and opulent draperies.

I told Jay that I hadn't had breakfast, and would get there as quickly as I could. He seemed to feel that I should have gone hungry, but I had been walking briskly for a couple of hours and I was famished. I figured it would be a long rehearsal, and the Sports Club was in the middle of a park, far from any coffee shops. And I didn't appreciate being notified of a 9 a.m. rehearsal at 8:45.

So I went into the hotel dining room, and there was Benny with a napkin tucked under his chin, having a leisurely breakfast. I ordered some eggs and coffee, and we finished at about the same time. He had a car and driver waiting, and told me I could ride with him to the rehearsal. Jay got in front with the driver, Benny climbed in the back seat and sprawled out in a way that left me hardly any room to sit down. He had done the same sort of thing when he sat down next to me in the lounge on the plane. He was a large man, and needed a lot of room, but he always managed to take up more than his share of the available space.

Benny, I learned, was known for copping clarinet reeds from his sax players, cadging a cigarette and keeping the pack, joining the "boys" for coffee and leaving them with the tab. He once invited drummer Maurice Mark and his wife to join him in a visit to a New York night club. At the end of the dinner, Benny went to make a phone call and never returned, leaving them with the bill. He once fired a bass player in New York after their plane had just made a stop in Washington, where the guy lived. And when Helen Ward, rehearsing at his house in Connecticut, complained that the room was cold, Benny said, "You're right," left the room for a minute, and returned wearing a heavy sweater, ready to continue with the rehearsal. I have heard people attribute this sort of thing to his "absentmindedness," but I think the truth is, he just didn't give a damn about anybody but himself.

Benny chatted jovially as we rode to the rehearsal in Moscow. When we arrived, I got out of the car and held the door open for him. He handed me his clarinet case, which I took, thinking he needed both hands to get out. He stepped by me and walked away, leaving me standing there with his horn. I was supposed to carry it! Not only that, I was clearly not supposed to walk beside him! I stood there in disbelief. He really took that King of Swing thing seriously!

I considered leaving the clarinet on the curb, but I couldn't do that to anybody's instrument. I angrily shoved the case into Jay's hands.

"Who the hell does he think he is?" I fumed. "If he wants a valet, why doesn't he hire one?"

"Don't get excited," Jay placated. "It's just his way."

On the U.S. part of the tour, we had been playing a quintet number on every concert. It was a medley of *Avalon*, *Body and Soul*, *Rose Room*, *Savoy*, and either *China Boy* or *The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise*. We'd play a chorus of each tune and

modulate to the next. At the rehearsal in Moscow, Benny got out his clarinet and came on stage where Teddy, Mel, Turk and I had set up. "Uh, boys, on that medley, I just wanted to be sure we're all using the same chords. Are we all using the same chords there?"

"Where do you mean?" we asked.

"Well, let's just run through it and see," said Benny.

We began with *Avalon*, and at the end of the chorus Benny stopped us. "Are we all using the same chords there?" he asked. We assured him we were. "Okay, let's go on," he said, and went into *Body and Soul*. At the end, same question, same answer. On *Rose Room*, he had Turk play a little by himself.

"That's good," Benny said. "Teddy, just follow the chords Turk is using." Turk felt embarrassed, since we'd all been following Teddy's lead on the changes.

Benny seemed deliberately insulting when he told Teddy, "Don't smoke during rehearsals," and a minute after Teddy put out his cigarette, lit one of his own.

At the end of the medley, played the same way we had always played it, Benny asked again if we were sure we were all using the same chords. We said we were sure. "Okay, boys, that's all for now." We still had no idea what had been bothering Benny about the number. All we knew was that we were at the Sports Club an hour before the rest of the band, and there was no coffee within miles of the place. When the rest of the guys arrived, I told John Frosk about the quintet rehearsal.

John said, "He didn't want to rehearse anything — he was just looking for a reed."

Before the concert that night the new band uniforms were unpacked and passed out. We had been carefully measured in New York but there hadn't been time for fittings. Some of us were luckier than others. My jacket sleeves were only slightly too long. Nice material though — red raw silk.

Jim Maxwell was built like a clan laird, twice as big as any of the rest of us in both height and girth. Someone at Alexander Shields had evidently not believed what had been written down when Jim was measured for his uniform. His jacket was okay, but his pants were impossible. He couldn't begin to get them closed. He used some dark trousers of his own for a day or two while his uniform pants were having a large piece of material inserted in the back.

Before we began playing, we had to spread out a little to make room for the forest of microphones that had sprouted onstage. Since we were being covered by several news services, there were five or six mikes wherever there normally would have been one.

During the second number, Benny came back to play between me and the piano, and I noticed he was cozying up to an NBC mike that wasn't live yet. "Benny," I whispered. "That's a dead mike."

He raised his eyebrows. "Don't worry about it, Pops," he said. "This is just for here." I guess he was referring to the fact that George Avakian and his engineer wouldn't be able to start recording until the following night.

But "here" was a house full of five thousand Russians, including Premier Nikita Khrushchev and his family.

(To be continued)