

# A Year in Global Jazz

Michael Tracy April 2006

As someone who has actively been involved in the jazz education movement for more than 30 years, I have witnessed firsthand the acceptance and growth of jazz and improvised music not only throughout the United States, but also in numerous countries around the world. I am amazed at the extent to which jazz has been included in all areas of music education. From the earliest years (even preschool) to adulthood and retirement, jazz is truly reaching individuals of all ages and walks of life – not only in the United States, but also in many places most Americans know little about. It is truly an international language spoken by many, and I marvel at the impact jazz has on individuals from other cultures.

My first opportunity to teach overseas came during a trip to Australia in 1979 with the Aebersold Jazz Workshops. While this was an exciting opportunity, what I experienced during the past few years, especially during my 2004-2005 sabbatical leave from the University of Louisville, was vastly different. It was an honor to teach students from other countries whose jazz traditions differ from those of the United States, and to help establish a jazz program in a country that was just beginning to develop its own jazz culture. My deepest thanks and appreciations go to everyone who made my experiences possible.



Photo courtesy of Michael Tracy  
Mike Tracy directing Estonian students in  
a final concert at Eesti Jazzilidud in Tallinn.

## Jazz in Estonia

Friends and colleagues gave me the oddest looks when I told them that I was going to Tallinn, Estonia for 10 weeks! The opportunity presented itself after representatives from the [Estonian Music Academy](#) (EMA, visited the University of Louisville School of Music at the end of our Fall 2003 semester. Rector Peep Lassmann and Vice-Rector Marje Lohuaru came to Louisville at the invitation of our former dean, Herbert Koerselman, who had met the two while attending meetings of the European Schools of Music. Herb had visited EMA; he thought the school remarkable, the administration open and innovative, and Tallinn one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen.

Rectors Lassmann and Lohuaru were interested in starting a jazz program at EMA and came to the United States to observe high-quality jazz programs. I know of no other administration that has approached the establishment of a jazz program in this fashion – taking their time to research successful programs. They were particularly interested in seeing the program at Louisville, and arrived during exam time. After sitting in on an entire day of juries, the three of us spent hours discussing improvisation, educational philosophy, the value of a jazz program in a university setting, the values we hold in relation to our students and teaching, and how exciting and challenging it would be to build a new program from scratch involving a concentrated effort from administration, faculty, and students. During the conversation, I mentioned that I was planning a sabbatical for the following year.

A few months later, rectors Lassmann and Lohuaru contacted me with a request to help them establish their program. They had asked that I be accepted into the Fulbright Senior Specialists program. This is a relatively new designation within the larger Fulbright program and is "designed to provide U.S. faculty and professionals with opportunities to collaborate with professional counterparts on curriculum and faculty development, institutional planning and a variety of activities." Fulbright helps to fund otherwise difficult, if not impossible, educational activities, and without it, EMA would not have been able to support someone for a sustained stay at their institution.

Jaak Sooäär, a fine guitarist and director of EMA's jazz program, and I worked out my schedule. We decided that I would break my time in Estonia into two parts. I would spend three weeks at EMA during the beginning of the 2004-2005 year, so that I could work with students as soon as they arrived at the school. I would then return for the final six to seven weeks of the term to work more intensely with the group, both collectively and individually. During my mid-term absence, Raul Soot, a gifted saxophonist and arranger who recently graduated from the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, would work with the students. The class with whom I worked would (hopefully) become future jazz teachers in Estonia. Before my arrival, EMA selected its first group of students,

limiting the size of the group to essentially that of a combo. The students, between the ages of 25 and 40, were truly committed to their education and worked to get as much out of our time together as possible.

Regular classes included jazz theory, improvisation, and combo and private applied lessons. I presented jazz history classes where I showed DVDs and played recordings of different jazz masters. Once a week, arranger and composer Teet Raik directed the jazz and non-jazz students in an ensemble or big band. When I returned for the final weeks of the term, I focused on the various ways to approach improvisation. Additionally, Raul worked with the students, who also took courses in piano and rhythm, and ear training. In addition to teaching and helping to establish the program's curriculum, I also helped modernize and expand EMA's jazz library with texts, classic recordings, and play-along aids. Much of their library materials were remnants of the Soviet era!

During the term, the students developed a repertoire of standard jazz literature. They applied their new knowledge through performances on a national television show and at two venues in the Tallinn area. Other offers followed. Their final project was a concert for [Eesti Jazziliidu](#) (Estonian Jazz Club) at Vanalinnastudio, an arts performing space. The groups played marvelously.

The jazz program has now become a vital component in a highly successful EMA music curriculum. Jazz faculty and administration are poised to expand the program.

## Jazz in Louisville, Russian Style – Open World Program

The Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville was one of four prestigious institutions selected to host the first musical exchange between Russia and the United States sponsored by the [Open World Leadership Center](#), the Library of Congress, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Eight Russian jazz musicians came to the University of Louisville in October 2004 for a 17-day experience that was to include learning about the U.S. music business (and its approach to jazz), playing in public and private venues, and more – including exposure to everyday life with American families and witnessing the U.S. political process.

The students were selected from throughout Russia, and their levels of musical education and jazz playing experience varied widely. Yet all were able to benefit from their time with master jazz educator, Jamey Aebersold, the legendary Heath Brothers (National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters), saxophonist Virginia Mayhew, and pianist Harry Pickens.

After a daylong master class with the Heath Brothers, the students opened for the group at an evening concert. After only one day with Percy, Jimmy, and Tootie Heath, the students' music showed a new sense of maturity and assuredness. Their performance experience didn't end with this show. They also performed to a sold-out house at a Louisville jazz club, were on the bill for a local jazz festival, played at a number of jam sessions, and twice appeared on television. They even visited a local elementary school where they played and talked about their lives in Russia and their experiences as musicians.

Although I could argue that all of their experiences at Louisville were unique, one truly stands out as something they would not have experienced in Russia. As a final project, we (both Russians and University of Louisville students and faculty) recorded a CD to showcase the musical talents of all who participated in the Open World project. Under the watchful eye of Grammy-nominated composer/arranger and Louisville faculty member John LaBarbera, we recorded and mixed 13 tracks. The final CD illustrates greatly the level of musicianship and cooperation that exists in and between our two countries.

The students spent part of their last day at Louisville discussing the American university system. At the university, they observed a far more varied curriculum (combining music education with other subjects), than what they had at home. It was obvious that their experiences were positive and would leave a lasting impression. Some of the students insisted they would look into the possibility of returning to Louisville to further their musical education.



## Jazz In Russia

As a result of my experience with the Open World Program, I was invited to perform at the 10th "Jazz nad Volgoy" ("Jazz Over the Volga River") in Yaroslavl, Russia, in March 2005. Yaroslavl Jazz Center and its director, Igor Gavrilov, have produced the semi-annual festival since 1981 in this historically significant, but (to Americans) little-known city. This festival invites groups from all over Russia and the world to perform every style of jazz from Dixieland to contemporary. The level of musicianship is exceptionally high and easily equals that of the more popular Western festivals. Jam sessions at the Jazz Center lasted well into the early morning; jazz was everywhere.

I performed with a group of five of the University of Louisville's Open World participants. It was gratifying to hear how much they had improved in the short time since their visit to Louisville. After the festival performances, I also had the opportunity to meet and play with two other Open World alumni during jam sessions. If these young professionals are representative of Russian jazz musicians, then the music there is in good hands. They are excellent musicians, excited about learning and performing, and willing to share their knowledge with others.

In addition to presenting the festival, the YJC also hosted the fourth Yaroslavl Jazz Competition, an event that showcases young jazz ensembles from throughout the area – piano trios, quintets, big bands, vocalists, and groups with different instrumentations. I was honored to help adjudicate the competition. No interpreter was needed – it was like being at home. Afterward, I spent time with a large group of jazz educators and directors. They were curious to discuss the similarities and differences in jazz pedagogy between our two countries. Everyone mentioned limited rehearsal time and how challenging it was to get band members to improvise. They wanted to know how Americans approached having everyone solo. Major obstacles in their teaching include acquiring materials such as play-along recordings and jazz ensemble arrangements. Materials we take for granted are just not available to students in Russia.

From Yaroslavl, I traveled to several large Russian cities. In Moscow I had the opportunity to visit with Alexander Oseichuk, director of the Moscow Conservatory Jazz Department, and his students. There is a waiting list of students who want to enter Professor Oseichuk program. They are the cream of aspiring Russian jazz musicians.

In Moscow, I also visited the B2 and Le Club jazz clubs, and met many jazz presenters and supporters. Cyril Moshkow, editor of [Web Resource](#), interviewed me for his new book on jazz education in Russia and elsewhere. I also visited the American Embassy. I was encouraged by the support the embassy is giving jazz, mainly through the efforts of Laurence Wohlers (minister counselor for public affairs), the Open World Program, and other visiting performers and educators.

In St. Petersburg I met more Open World alumni, watched a jazz rehearsal at the Jazz Philharmonic Center, and visited the JFC jazz club. I was also asked to speak at the [American Center](#) about jazz in America. We listened to and discussed *So What*, from Miles Davis' classic *Kind of Blue* album. Even with late notice, a large group attended. Everyone was so interested and knowledgeable about Miles and his music.

Jazz has a long tradition in Russia. Throughout my trip, I was impressed by the quality of the musicians I was able to hear and the high level of interest expressed by musicians and educators for the Open World projects in each of the cities we visited. Like everywhere in the world, the best musicians will travel to the places that have the most opportunities for study and performance. It was clear, however, that jazz in Russia is also reaching many who are living outside of the major cities.

## Jazz in Poland

In 2003, the [Akademia Muzyczna](#) in Katowice, Poland, and the University of Louisville School of Music, began what has grown into a highly successful exchange program. The jazz programs at each school were the catalysts for this relationship.

The Akademia Muzyczna celebrated its 75th anniversary in March 2005. Its jazz program, under the direction of bassist Jacek Niedziela, began 35 years ago. Americans, starting with Dave Brubeck's 1958 visit to Poland, heavily influenced the development of the jazz community and jazz education in that country. Despite geographic, cultural, and political differences between Katowice and Louisville, the jazz programs at the Akademia and Louisville are very similar in their philosophical approaches, combo and improvisation focus, and level of student ability. In not quite three years' time, the jazz programs, as well as the rest of the music programs, have established a close relationship that involves frequent interaction between faculty and students. Faculty members and students from both institutions have visited each other's campus, and have been actively involved performing and presenting educational workshops.



Photo courtesy of Michael Tracy  
Michael Tracy performing with the Akademia Muzyczna Jazz Ensemble, Katowice, Poland.

## Jazz in the United Kingdom

Eastern Europe's interest in jazz and jazz education may be surprising to some, but it is no surprise that jazz has a well-established community in the United Kingdom. What may be news, however, is the number of adults who are taking the opportunity to learn and perform jazz after years of "going it alone."

In August 2004, I was in London as part of the annual [Jazzwise Summer School](#) with Jamey Aebersold. Charles Alexander (Managing Director, Jazzwise Publications Ltd.) has coordinated this educational event for 20 years. The school works much like the Aebersold camps in the United States, and attracts aspiring jazz musicians from all over the United Kingdom and Europe. Interestingly, the vast majority of the 120 participants were adults.

## Jazz in Brazil

I have made many trips to Brazil to perform and teach since my direct association with that country began in 1987. Vadim Arsky, an accomplished saxophonist, began his master's degree at the University of Louisville that year, returned to Brazil after graduation, and eventually began teaching at the [University of Brasilia](#) (UNB). Many Brazilian musicians, jazz and non-jazz, have since sought degrees at Louisville. In 2001, pianist Renato Vasconcellos was the first graduate of our master's degree program in jazz. He is now teaching jazz and improvised music at UNB. During my most recent visit to Brazil (June 2004), I had the opportunity to present master classes at UNB and perform with the university's jazz ensemble. I was also invited by guitarist Marcos Cavalcante to visit the University of Campinas. The university there is very interested in hosting a jazz camp, much like the ones in the United States. Jazz, albeit with a Brazilian twist, is certainly very much alive throughout that vast country.

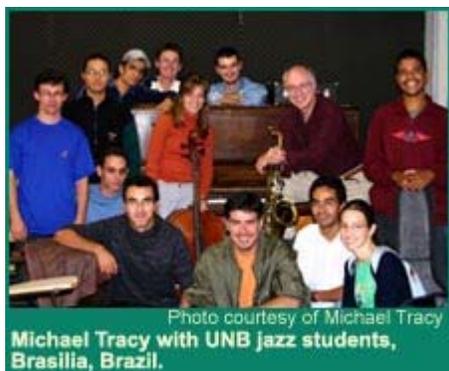


Photo courtesy of Michael Tracy  
Michael Tracy with UNB jazz students, Brasilia, Brazil.

## Postscript

International jazz opportunities continue to arise. The University of Louisville Jazz Studies Program was recently awarded a subsequent Open World grant, but this time with a special change. As before, a quintet of Russian musicians will visit during our annual Jazz Week festival, while eight musicians and four jazz educators from Louisville will participate in the International Association of Schools of Jazz meeting this coming June at the University of Louisville. The change is that Americans will be traveling overseas. This spring our graduate jazz quintet and I will visit St. Petersburg and Yaroslavl in Russia, as well as Tallinn, Estonia and Helsinki, Finland. It will be a wonderful opportunity for our students to meet their peers and to renew old friendships.

As if that isn't enough, I had the honor of being invited to visit the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music in Mackay, Australia. Their jazz program has an amazing cooperative exchange happening on Hamilton Island, a true paradise where jazz played by students can be heard right off of the Great Barrier Reef – a wonderful story, but for another time!

Lastly, information regarding this year's International Association of Schools of Jazz meeting at the University of Louisville is on Louisville's music department [web site](#). I hope to see you there.

A veritable "Ambassador of Jazz," **Michael Tracy** has traveled throughout the United States, Australia, Belize, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Singapore, and Wales as a jazz performer and educator. Tracy is Professor of Music and Director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program at the University of Louisville, a Fulbright Senior Specialist, and past coordinator for the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops and the Open World Program. He will coordinate the 2006 International Association of Schools of Jazz Meeting to be at the University of Louisville School of Music the summer of 2006. As a saxophonist, Tracy has released two CDs on the SeaBreeze label, *Gusting*, featuring a variety of contemporary compositions, and *Tracings*, featuring original compositions and Brazilian standards and arrangements.

