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MUSICIAN ON THE MOVE

The jazz ambassador

U of L's Tracy takes music abroad

By Rick Mattingly

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Music professor Mike Tracy was looking forward to having some extra time at home to practice during his sabbatical from the University of Louisville this past academic year.

Instead, he ended up becoming something of an American jazz ambassador.

His travels began in June 2004 with a trip to Brazil to teach at the Universidade de Brasilia and to visit the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in preparation for an upcoming exchange program. In March, he visited Poland to participate in the 75th anniversary of the Akademia Muzyczna im. Karola Szymanowskiego, a music school that has close ties to U of L.

His biggest project, however, involved spending several weeks in Estonia, where he helped the Estonian Music Academy in Tallinn establish a jazz program. Tracy also took advantage of a unique opportunity to play jazz in Russia.

"I hadn't intended on doing any of that," said Tracy, who is director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies department at U of L. "But those experiences really recharged my batteries and rekindled my love for what I do."

The seeds for Tracy's trip to Estonia were planted during the 2003-04 holiday season, when a group of music educators from that country visited U of L as part of a search for information about starting a jazz program. They ended up inviting Tracy to work with their students and applied for a Fullbright Senior Specialist Scholarship to cover his fees and expenses.

"Jazz represents a lot of things to the people in those countries that we don't appreciate any more," Tracy said. "It's not just about the notes or about getting a gig. Life is tough in those countries, and as some of the people I met told me, jazz lets them express themselves in a way they can't otherwise do."

Tracy made his first trip to Estonia during the last week of August 2004. He spent three weeks at the Estonian Music Academy setting things up.

"They had no syllabi, no text books -- nothing," Tracy said. "I didn't even know what the school expected us to accomplish. But the students were very skilled. They had been selected through an audition and ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-30s."

Tracy conducted classes in theory, improvisation and jazz history. He also held "combo classes" so he could play with the students as much as possible and they could apply what they were learning.

"They were like sponges, soaking up every bit of information about jazz I could give them," Tracy said.

Shortly after Tracy returned to Louisville, a group of Russian jazz students arrived to study at U of L through the Open World program sponsored by the Library of Congress.

"We gave them as many opportunities and experiences as possible," Tracy said. "They did concerts at school and also played at Big Rock (Jazz Festival in Cherokee Park), and they made a CD. They were also able to study with visiting jazz artists the Heath Brothers."

After the Russians left, Tracy returned to Estonia for a seven-week residency. His wife, Louisville Orchestra violinist Heidi Tracy, and their two children, Lake and Jenna, accompanied him.

"We lived next to a castle," Tracy said. "My children were able to experience this amazing culture, including taking classes where they were taught how to be medieval knights. We were also able to visit several other European cities while we were there."

During Tracy's first trip, the Estonian Music Academy had given him \$2,000 to buy jazz CDs for the school in Louisville that are not readily available in Estonia. To stretch the money as far as possible, Tracy stocked up on used jazz CDs from local shops such as ear X-tacy, Better Days and Underground Sounds. In addition, Jamey Aebersold donated a selection of his instructional play-along sets.

"The library was thrilled," Tracy said. "It is very difficult for people in the former Soviet countries to get American records. When someone manages to get an American jazz album, all the musicians get together and listen to it over and over, learning every note. There is such a hunger for the music, and everyone shares whatever they can get."

During his seven-week stay, Tracy worked with the students to strengthen the foundation he had established during his first visit.

"I gave them more material than they could ever learn in a year," Tracy said. "I told them that each of them would learn it at his or her own rate."

Although much of Tracy's goal was to educate the Estonian musicians about American jazz, he also encouraged them to draw from their own heritage.

"The Estonians have rich classical and folk music traditions, and they are very proud of their culture," Tracy said. "Although they were very hungry for American music, when they improvised you could hear their own culture coming through. So as they evolve and mature as jazz musicians, it will be interesting to hear how they mix American music with their own musical influences."

Just before Tracy was due to leave Estonia, he received an e-mail inviting him to perform at a jazz festival in Russia with the students who had been at U of L the previous fall. Funding was arranged through the Library of Congress, and in March, Tracy headed for Yaroslavl, Russia, where he was amazed by the vibrant jazz scene.

"There is a jazz center in the middle of town, and they sponsor this 10-day festival every other year," Tracy said. "Every night at the festival there were three bands, ranging from Dixieland to be-bop to off-the-wall. The concerts ended about 11 p.m., and then there would be jam sessions until 5 or 6 in the morning. It was like being in New York in the '30s and '40s."

Tracy also visited Moscow, where he discovered several active jazz clubs. He found more jazz in St. Petersburg.

"They have this art-deco place called the Jazz Philharmonic Center, which reminded me of the Louisville Palace," Tracy said. "I saw a big band rehearsal, and the musicians, who ranged from 20 to 70 years old, were playing really well. The walls were covered with posters of all the great jazz musicians."

Since his trips, Tracy has talked to the Open World organizers about taking American jazz students to countries such as Estonia and Russia.

"I want my students to see what this music means to people, and that this is for real," Tracy said. "Even if we speak different languages through words, we speak the same language in another way -- and we can all play music together."

[^^ Back to top](#)

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