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Interview

Oleg Kireyev

By Jamie Cosnowsky

Photos Courtesy of the Artist

The Western press has referred to saxophonist Oleg Kireyev as the "Revolutionary Reedman from the Urals." His musical career started in the town of Ufa where he studied the piano and first fell in love with jazz. Although the jazz scene was happening a half a world away, young Oleg was influenced by Chick Corea and John Coltrane. He spent time mastering improvisation.

In 1985, he founded the band Orlan and quickly became a phenomenon on the Russian jazz scene. Kireyev was fascinated by Bashkir folklore, and was the first to take an ethno-approach to jazz. His music includes folk instruments such as the "kurai" which is a Bashkir wind instrument and the "kubyz" (Jew's harp), along with his guttural singing technique that is always an audience favorite. He combined jazz standards with exotic folklore (ethno-jazz) and Orlan's popularity grew quickly as the global music scene was exploding.

With the success of Orlan and performances in Russia and abroad, Kireyev traveled to Poland. He spent three years there, in the early 1990's, playing in the country's best jazz clubs—and playing with Poland's most popular jazz artists. In 1994, Kireyev won a scholarship to study with jazz legend, Bud Shank, and traveled to the United States. Kireyev was invited to perform at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland where he was awarded a diploma for outstanding performance. He has also performed at the Birmingham Jazz Festival and the Ealing Jazz Festival in England, where he continues to tour. His 2000 recording, *Love Letters*, had strong sales in the United Kingdom.

Incorporating traditional swing, Moldavian tunes, African rhythms and jazz into a distinctive art form, Kireyev recorded his latest CD, *Mandala*, in 2004 with percussionist Njaga Sambe (Senegal); guitarist Valery Panfilov (Moldova); bassist Victor Matiukhin (Ukraine); drummer Ildar Nafigov (Tatarstan); keyboardist Valery Belikov (Ukraine) and Kireyev on saxophones (Bashkiria). The result is a mix of ancient tunes of Asia with a striking contemporary sound, very high energy and exceptional musicianship. The CD will be released in the United States in April, 2008 on the Jazzheads label.

Jazz Improv met Oleg back in October when he was in town for Jazz Improv LIVE! Convention and Festival 2007. We caught up with him again to find out more about the man behind the music.

JI: Can you talk about your upcoming concert at Symphony Space with your band, Feng Shui Jazz Theatre. How often are you able to perform in the United States?

OK: This is the first show for The Feng Shui Theater in New York. Our previous show was in Texas during the SXSW festival in March, 2007 and we used a slightly different format—different version. As for myself, the last time I was in New York in October of 2007. I had several gigs in New York clubs, and was part of the showcase during the Jazz Improv LIVE! Convention, along with other American musicians. We performed my original compositions written in a straight-ahead style. I love the States—the birthplace of Jazz. New York is a Mecca for me, as it is for any jazzmen. I have not traveled much in the United States. I would love to be able to perform with The Feng Shui Theater, and we are working now on presenting the show in as many cities in the U.S. as possible.

JI: Talk about your early years growing up in Russia and how you first became interested in music. What was the spark that made you become interested in jazz?

OK: As a child I was very drawn to musical instruments, and had different musical compositions in my head. Music mesmerized me; creating images in my imagination. Sometimes images themselves created musical resonance. My uncle, my mother's brother, was the first one to recognize this interest in music and the instruments. He took me to the music shop to buy a violin. My parents had no money for the piano. Seeing my hesitation in front of the violin, they went for it and together with my uncle bought the Soviet piano on credit, which was unheard of at that time. I am still thankful for this choice. My violin experience might have wound up being so negative that it would have prevented me from pursuing music at all. I also don't think the neighbors would have enjoyed my violin exercises. I entered the music school in Ufa (in the Urals) and spent seven years studying piano. At that time, there was no way to study jazz in Russia. My school curriculum was based on classical music. Sometimes, to avoid tedious repetitiveness of the school homework, I would start improvising or just play melodies that I heard in my head. Once I heard "The Shadow Of Your Smile," it became the beginning of the path of my creative development. I was told that it is called jazz.

JI: How has Russia embraced jazz as an artform?

OK: The Russian public is very musically advanced, and educated in many different forms of jazz music, from mainstream to very sophisticated avant-garde. In the past several years, themajority of interest is focused on so-called "world music." I know that this is true for Europe as well. In the recent years, jazz education in Russia has reached very high levels. Young musicians are able to travel internationally, which encourages their integration into the international jazz community. At the same time, I have to point out the differences. In Russia, as well as in other Eastern European countries, there is a prevalence of melody, compared to Afro-American culture where rhythm rules. Because of that, Russian and European jazzmen sometimes lack in "groove," — something

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Willie Martinez
La Familia Sextet

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that is an essential part of life for American musicians. It is easy to explain. The roots of jazz are in Africa, while European and Eastern European culture is known for classical music forms: Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Bach and other European geniuses.

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JI: Talk about your creation of Ethno-jazz and the influences that you draw from.

OK: I consider myself a mix of two races— being born in the Urals, the place of residence of several different nations like Bashkirs, Tatars and others. It was a natural progression for me to be involved and interested in different cultures. Bashkiria borders Asia and Europe — so Asian culture was always part of my life, and influenced my creative development. Asian rhythms and melodies are different from American or European ones, and at the same time, are similar. An exotic tapestry of sounds and forms can be created using the musical fantasy of a jazz musician and different moods. It becomes possible because of the knowledge of different ethnic cultures and music folkloric traditions. Combining African rhythms and Moldavian melody, you achieve something that is impossible to imagine in pure jazz or ethnic interpretations. You can argue whether these creations have a right to exist. But the reaction of the public is the only true proof. The emotions these melodies inspire in the listening public are real. I play "mainstream" jazz with great pleasure and feel very close to the "old school" of Dexter Gordon, Coleman Hawkins, as well as the contemporary styles of Michael Brecker and Joshua Redman. My original compositions are written in both traditional jazz formats as well as in the contemporary straight ahead jazz. In the 1980's, I recorded a disc called *Bashkiria Legends*. It featured all original compositions using ethnic instruments and electronics. My band was called Orlan and was one of the first international bands in Russia that was capable of this kind of experiment with fusion, ethnic music and electric jazz instruments. This record is now a collectable. In the 21st Century, ethno jazz and mainstream are equal parts of my music. Since 2001, the ethno jazz project, Feng Shui Theater, combines not only Bashkir-Tatar influence, but absorbs and combines influences of other world music cultures. Our inspiration can come from different sources both in ethnic and stylistic forms. The interpretation of the melody can be brought by a French sonnet or an opera star. We share the stage. The results are a fusion of the most heady jazz and Italian opera. At this point in time, I have more then ten recordings done in different genres and styles.

JI: Who are some of the influential artists with whom you have performed? And how have they created different demands on, and challenges to your musical perspectives, life understandings, and otherwise helped you grow?

OK: In 1989, Miles Davis' rhythm section musicians were in Warsaw, Poland. Meeting musicians of that level left the most massive emotional impression on me. At later times there were more creative meetings with outstanding musicians and great personalities like Bud Shank, Hal Galper, Steve Ellington, Ray Alexander and Adam Nussbaum. I later toured with Nussbaum, as part of a European-American band. It was a seven city tour of Russia. In 1994, I took part in Bud Shank's Summer School, and that was a great experience. He was an amazing person and a musician to know. I have met Herb Alpert there and other

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great musicians. These meetings only reinforced my opinion of the nature of jazz: "Massive swing, total attention to each other, awareness of the listeners and sense of humor." — the combination of the parts make for a great show.

JI: Could you discuss the relevance for you as an artist, to approach this music as a road to be traveled, with the opportunity for a lifetime of growth and learning, as opposed to a destination to be reached.

OK: Jazz can become a personal religion and meaning of life for a musician. Partially, it is true in my case, since the music was present in my life from my childhood. At the same time, I never forget that jazz is only one road towards creative and emotional development. You can get lost following the road and become just a technician who is going through the motions, rather than being an artist.

JI: What are some of the challenges you face and expect to face as an independent artist, and how do you make them work for you?

OK: The major challenges involve the recording of jazz. It has always been a problem in Russia, because of the lack of recording studios, and professional, talented sound engineers, that are capable of creative collaboration with the musicians. Also, it is hard to organize quality music tours in Russia — since most of venue managers still have an old Soviet time mentality. There are very few professional music/artist managers to work with, or concert impresarios. It is slowly changing and in the recent years we are seeing more and more quality performing venues being open that are appropriate for international stars. Personally, my major challenges are Moscow traffic jams.

JI: Could you talk about the kinds of positive thinking in which you immerse yourself to maintain and drive your enthusiasm and creativity every day?

OK: In my personal life, I try to surround myself with good music. My tastes range from classical music, any kind of jazz to pop and rock. I live outside of Moscow, in a very peaceful home, surrounded by woods, very close to the museum that belonged to Lenin. I ride my bicycle in the park surrounding the museum—probably following the same paths as the Proletariat leader himself. It was my personal choice to leave the hustle and bustle of Moscow. I spend summer evenings on my roof, counting the planes and thinking of people flying in them, and contemplating the "beginnings" of music. Where does it come from? I have not found the answer to that question yet. In my opinion, a composer is the conductor of world energy, harmony and beauty—what he/she can hear.

JI: In addition to your involvement in music, what other activities help provide balance in your life?

OK: Reading Eastern philosophies, traveling as part of my music tours, and my family and friends are what make my life complete.

JI: Is there anything that I have not asked you about that you would like to talk about?

OK: In the past couple of years I was lucky enough to meet a number of the outstanding jazz performers of our times: Joshua Redman, Antonio Sanchez, Al Foster, Scott Hamilton and many others. All of them are not just excellent musicians, but very open and friendly people. We have a Club, in Moscow, located 300 meters away from the Red Square. It is called "Union of Composers," where we play jazz music for the Muscovites as well as for guests of our city. We are proud to support the music and make it a part of people's lives. You can visit the website at http://eng.ucclub.ru. ■

The Feng Shui Jazz Theatre, will premier at New York's Symphony Space on Saturday, April 26, at 8 pm. Symphony Space is located at 2537 Broadway. Tickets: $30 ($25 senior/$15 student) and may be purchased by calling the box office at 212-864-5400 from 11:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday or online at symphonyspace.org. Student tickets may only be purchased in person at the box office (12 noon–7 p.m.) with proof of ID.
Visit Oleg's website at www.kireyev.ru.

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