



THOSE WHO BUILT “SOCIALISM WITH A JAZZ FACE”: SOVIET JAZZ FANDOM IN THE 1960s AND LATVIAN JAZZ FAN LEONID NIDBALSKY

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This article uncovers the underlying social and cultural basis for the appearance of Soviet jazz fandom in the late 1950s. It shows how this phenomenon grew out of the *šestidesātniki* (*shestidesyatniki*) movement, who the individuals were that were a part of it and uncovers the ideological platform underlying their activism. The second part introduces the role of American jazz broadcaster Willis Conover as a mediator between Soviet jazz fans and how jazz obtained the status of celebrity worshipped by thousands of devotees. Finally, Latvian jazz fan Leonid Nidbalsky is selected to elucidate the life in jazz of a person with great prominence in the developing jazz culture in the country.

Keywords: Jazz fandom, Soviet Union, 1960s, *šestidesātniki* (*shestidesyatniki*)

Atslēgvārdi: Džeza fanu kustība, Padomju Savienība, 20. gadsimta 60. gadi, *šestidesātniki* (*shestidesyatniki*)

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Following the years of Late Stalinism when Soviet jazz met its lowest political tolerance in its entire history and was forced to disappear from the public space, the music experienced a gradual growth in the conditions of Khrushchev's Thaw in the second half of the 1950s. Then under the guidance of new partial leadership, the repressions of Stalinism were condemned and society became more open both at the domestic level and in terms of foreign policy. Frequently referred to as a historical turning point in post-war Soviet culture was the Sixth International Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 bringing around 34,000 young people from all over the world to Moscow (Peacock 2012). The extensive cultural program of the event also embraced jazz with performances by numerous foreign groups¹ and competitions of ensembles. The festival was a great inspirational moment for the music to awaken and search for its own voice in 1960s.

Equally with the musicians called *džazmeny šestidesātniki* (jazzmen sixtiers), the jazz culture was developed by jazz fans whose dedicated and ardent activities established the conditions for the music to flourish. The phenomenon of jazz being an object of intense devotion occurred first during Late Stalinism when *džazovyje lūdi* (jazz enthusiasts) formed a community of fans who gathered regularly to listen to jazz, learned about the music and shared their knowledge, collected jazz records and last but not the least, also

1 Among the visitors were the American singer Beatrice Reading, the *Jeff Ellison Quintet* and saxophonist Bruce Turner from Britain, the Dixieland group *New Orleans Rome* from Italy, the *Gunnar Ormslev Quartet* from Iceland, Michel Legrand from France, the *Southern Cross Jazz Band* from Australia, and Polish pianist Krzysztof Komeda (Feyertag Istorija 154).

played the music (Tsipursky 2016: 347). Those were in general well-educated people from a middle class background who perceived themselves as integrated into Soviet postwar society and comfortable with its various dimensions (Tsipursky 2016: 360). Unlike *stilâgi*'s ² spectacular non-conformism and expressed preference for a Western way of life, jazz enthusiasts did not deliberately oppose themselves to the cultural mainstream and expressed less of an appetite for striking dissident exhibitionism (Ibid.: 348). Their jazz passion and dedicated activities were decisive in paving the way to music's new awakening at the end of the 1950s. The spectrum of the fans' pursuits was broad including all facets necessary for the jazz culture to prosper. In Leningrad, for instance, the first legal jazz club in the Soviet Union D-58 (Jazz-58) was opened in the Cultural Palace of Gorky in 1958 by the initiative of jazz lovers including, among others, the most prominent Russian jazz historian Vladimir Feiertag (*Vladimir Fejertag*, 1931) and drummer and ardent jazz enthusiast Valery Myssovsky (*Valerij Myssovskij*). Yuri Vikharev (*Ūrij Viharev*), the pianist and jazz fan, was the initiator in launching the jazz club at the Leningrad State University in 1961.

With the endorsement of a new generation of Komsomol³ functionaries (Kozlov 1998: 101) who were inspired by Moscow's Youth festival, café types of jazz clubs Moloděžnoe, Aelita and Sinâ ptica appeared in Moscow. In Estonia, the composer and jazz enthusiast Uno Naissoo organized the first proper sized jazz festival in 1958⁴.

This article uncovers the underlying social and cultural basis for the appearance of Soviet jazz fandom in the late 1950s. It shows how this phenomenon grew out of the *šestidesâtniki* movement, who the individuals were that were a part of it and uncovers the ideological platform underlying their activism. The second part introduces the role of American jazz broadcaster Willis Conover who served as a mediator between Soviet jazz fans and how jazz obtained the status of celebrity worshipped by thousands of devotees. Finally, Latvian jazz fan Leonid Nidbalsky is selected to elucidate the life in jazz of a person with great prominence in developing jazz culture in the country.

Jazz fandom and *šestidesâtniki* movement

Mark Duffett (2014) in his book *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices* has referred to the difficulties in generalizing the nature of fandom since its complexity. According to his definition, music fandom in general is a wide-ranging phenomenon, appearing at a variety of times and in a variety of places; it is both personal and collective and encompasses a range of tastes, roles, identities and practices. It is a cultural stance that combines "a threshold of an affective love engagement with, variously or in combination, musical appreciation, music practice, celebrity-following, social networking, dancing, collecting, and self-expression" (Duffett 2014: 14). The studies of music fandom are nowadays multidimensional and facing many challenges, since the nature of a fan debates

2 *Stilâgi* were members of a youth counterculture from the late 1940s until the early 1960s in the Soviet Union.

3 Leninist Young Communist League in the Soviet Union.

4 The first seminal event was organized by Naissoo in 1949 called the *loominguline kohtumine* (creative meeting).

contested accepted notions of objectivity, cultural value and authority, as well as ongoing attitudes to modernity and the role of the mass media (Whyton 2014: 73). Jazz fandom in particular tends to be presented as a force counter to the commercially-oriented media industry (Ibid.: 76). Enthusiasts frequently locate themselves not as fans, but as 'aficionados' who possess high levels of cultural capital and appreciate difficult music (Ibid.: 15).

Why jazz fandom emerged and who the people were that were a part of this cultural phenomenon in the late 1950s and 1960s Soviet Union is thoroughly explained by Soviet jazz writer and critic Leonid Pereverzev (*Leonid Pereverzev, 1931–2006*):

"Most of our young people of the 50s got to know jazz during a critical period in their maturing, which coincided with the breaking of their whole worldview, that is, when they were in dire need of spiritual support and some kind of new source of faith, hope and love. Young people, lost in the chaos of ideological decay and universal alienation, through jazz suddenly found what they lacked in the surrounding world and even in their parents' home: sincerity, warmth, unconditional support, close brotherhood and a circle of like-minded people. Fed up with the vulgarity of contemporary popular music and the whole culture of social realism in general, they acquired in jazz a liberatingly fresh artistic vision and reflection of reality; the ability to accept facts as they are; caustic sarcasm, testing the strength of every pathetic statement, every self-confident pose, each conclusion claiming completeness; finally, an indestructible humour, instantly exposing and ridiculing any falsity, bombast, imaginary significance and cautious (and therefore flawed) seriousness." (Vermenich 1999)

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According to Pereverzev, jazz fandom appeared among the generation that reached maturity around the time of the re-advent of jazz in the second half of the 1950s after the freeze of the late Stalinist period. Due to Khrushchev's initiatives toward a cultural "thaw" in general and the Moscow Youth Festival in particular, the entire political and cultural climate in the Soviet Union became freer and jazz had a chance to appear afresh in public music venues. Those who picked up jazz as a field of fandom were part of a special generation – the new Soviet intelligentsia determined to reform and liberalize their country following Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. The speech was transforming but also shocking. Zubok, for instance, compares the impact of the speech on the younger generation of educated Russians with that of the German invasion in 1941: "Just as then, a world of certainties came to an end, now that core beliefs and commonly accepted wisdom had turned to dust." (Zubok 2009: 61). The crucial executive body of the reformers consisted of members of the liberal intelligentsia – men and women from urban centres called *šestidesâtniki*. They came of age after Stalin's death and were too young to feel either the fear associated with Stalin's repressions or the affection of the leader.

The appearance of the new Soviet intelligentsia was relevant to both the demographic prominence of youth during the 1950s and the unprecedented numbers of young people

who were in programs of higher education at that time (Zubok 2009). Although against totalitarianism and bureaucracy, they did not struggle with communism, but instead, sought a new type of socialism “with a human face” (Kochetkova 2011: 53). The term *šestidesâtniki*, nevertheless, has no unambiguous meaning despite being in active use. Kochetkova (2011: 72), for instance, considers the intelligentsia or the *šestidesâtniki* not as a homogeneous group, but rather defines them as an imagined community (Anderson 1991). According to general definitions, the *šestidesâtniki* formed a social stratum, professionally occupied with mental, mostly complex creative labour, development and the dissemination of culture. A more careful examination suggests that they were workers in science and culture, teachers, engineers, doctors and journalists who made up this group (Kochetkova 2011: 3). Therefore, in the broadest sense, the *šestidesâtniki* can be identified as a generation with elite status, dedicated to a liberalising reform with membership that ranged from intellectuals and artists to members of the *nomenklatura*⁵.

The individuals seen as jazz fans functioned within a wide variety of professional fields representing technological, administrative, healthcare, managerial or educational and artistic fields. As Vermenich states, among jazz fans there were “engineers, doctors, teachers, students, journalists, artists, architects and archivists, physicists and lyricists, candidates of science and club workers” (Vermeniĉ 1999). The vast majority of those people had a non-musical background, according to Vermenich:

“Some of them were simultaneously professional musicians, but the overwhelming majority consisted of those who, without making any musical sounds, dedicated their entire life to the promotion of jazz, holding concerts, festivals and recording sessions, opening jazz clubs, studios and youth cafes, organising photographic exhibitions, “steamers” and jam sessions.” (Vermeniĉ 1999)

The following brief selection of examples illustrates the occupational diversity of jazz fans. The author of the book on Soviet jazz fandom, Yuri Vermenich (*Ŭrij Vermeniĉ*, 1934–2016) himself, was an engineer radio-physicist by occupation whose jazz-related activism embraced jazz criticism, translating around 30 books, educating and launching a jazz club in Voronezh. Leonid Pereverzev was a design theorist, known in Soviet jazz history for his early analytical works on jazz and pedagogical activity in the first Soviet jazz education program, the *Moskvoreĉ'e* Music Education Studio that opened in 1967. The person with greatest prominence in jazz-promotional activities was Alexey Batashev (*Aleksej Batašev*, 1934–2021) – a graduate from the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology with a degree in chemical physics and radio engineering. His authorship of the book *Soviet Jazz – a Historical Survey* (1972) awarded him a title of the pioneer in the realm of Soviet jazz historiography; his jazz popularizing activities were held in all possible formats ranging from newspaper articles to university lecturing, both in the Soviet Union and abroad.

5 *De facto* elite in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Block holding and controlling both private and public powers.

Jazz fandom along with the post-Stalin intelligentsia did not simply appear as generational phenomena resulting from the change in the political powers, under the influence of external political or economic factors. They both emphasize the long process of developing a collective generational identity. This generation inherited the high moral qualities of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia: fidelity to the truth, courage and integrity, defense of the sanctity of human life, beauty and moral self-perfection, ethical purity, righteousness and self-worth, and a lifelong commitment to intellectual endeavour (Bergman 1992). At the same time, *šestidesâtniki* were accused of the sin of being idealistic, naïve, romantic, spineless, enslaved by ideology, collectivist, cautious reformers, dreamy and escapist (Kotchekova 2011: 61).

The previous lengthy quote from Pereverzev tends to confirm the image of the *šestidesâtniki* intelligentsia. This self-description of the community of jazz fans expresses an exalted yearning for the satisfaction of human needs such as sincerity, warmth, unconditional support, close brotherhood and like-mindedness – values lost in the “chaos of ideological decay and universal alienation.” (Vermeňič 1999). The liberating freshness and immediacy embedded in jazz were supposed to satisfy their hunger for truth and the necessity to be reflective and critical. The need for brotherhood and meaningful human contact fostered the formation of the community of like-minded people connected by their interest in jazz. In fact, the allowing of informal gatherings in which intellectual and social ties could develop was a feature of the cultural “thaw”. Those groups of friends known as *kompanii* were central in the lives of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia. Such *kružki* (circles) fostered discussion, debate, and the development of friendships and personal bonds that any developing subculture requires (Zubok 2009). Jazz fandom, however, became separated from that model in the sense that it did not function in the mode of small local level groups but its grasp was trans-local, unifying fans all over the Soviet Union; therefore, enabling the single individual to be part of a wider intersubjective network. Vermeňich describes the network in terms of religious sects, the members of which are received with hospitality in each ‘prayer house’ or jazz club:

“An analogy with religious sects comes to my mind. If I am in an unfamiliar city where I have never been before, but there is a jazz club, then I will go with complete confidence straight to this jazz “house of prayer”. I will find there brothers in spirit who will open the door for me and show me attention and cordiality. This is how it was.” (Vermeňič 1999)

Soviet jazz fandom became a mode of escapism in the sense of helping to dispose of the vulgar popular music and the hound of Soviet mass culture. In addition, fandom turned out to be an enlightenment mission pursued through a devotion to jazz and providing a detachment from the worries and troubles of everyday life. The image of the intelligentsia as people who existed beyond momentary social concerns has strong links with world culture and the historical tradition of the intelligentsia. In both the Russian intellectual tradition and the official Soviet ideology, a preoccupation with everyday life for its own sake was considered unpatriotic, subversive, un-Russian, or even anti-Soviet. Furthermore, the

entire Russian/Soviet cultural identity depended on the heroic opposition to everyday life (Boym 1995: 3). Vermenich (1992) in his observations, provides evidence of this cultural injunction: the exclusion of the mundane or “*byt*” from the communications between jazz fans was part of their normative behaviour. He says it involved never being interested in the work or family life of other fellows. What really mattered in this shared interest was the personality of the musicians or the jazz lover, and nothing else.

The cult of Willis Conover

Part of the everyday practice for the Soviet jazz fan community was listening to the Voice of America Jazz Hour led by Willis Conover. The broadcaster who was almost unknown in his own country became a saint-like persona for his listeners in the former Eastern Bloc from when the Jazz Hour started in the mid-1950s through to the end of the 1960s. The idea of “jazz being synonymous with Jazz Hour” and “Jazz Hour as being synonymous with Conover” became an integral part of the identity of the entire jazz culture in the Eastern Block.

Conover as a mediator between jazz and its devotees became a peculiar jazz celebrity – a mythical figure received with a devotion similar to religious worship. He was called a “Godfather of Jazz”; his fans took to calling themselves the “children of Conover” and collected jazz-related devotional objects forming special spaces of “worship” – jazz corners (Ritter 2013).

The relationship between music fandom and religiosity is frequently discussed but at the same time, a contested topic. The critic is targeted against imposed narratives that automatically assume that fandom functions as a form of religious behavior which, however, provides a limited understanding of fandom (Whyton 2014: 73). Matt Hills applies the term “neo-religiosity” indicating the appropriated discourse of religion used within fan cultures. Hills suggests that cult fandoms may display a type of religiosity without forming “religions” (Hills 2002: 119). What makes a cult practice within Soviet jazz fandom distinctive is the worshipping deification of the music mediator non-musical person instead of musical celebrities. The affective reception of Conover occurred because of him being a liaison figure who delivered their beloved music.

The primary attribute of Conover’s fame was his voice – his spoken manner, clear, measured pronunciation and characteristic, sonorous, baritone voice. He also used a direct listener-orientated mode of expression that evoked a sense of intimacy with his audiences who received the broadcast as if it were directed to them personally. Therefore, Conover was a “bodyless” celebrity whose voice, manner of talking and conversation subjects became objects of worship. When such a person adored and identified solely on the basis of his voice suddenly appeared in front of his devotees in the flesh and life-sized during the Tallinn ’67 jazz festival – it was a shock, it was like a revelation, as Estonian guitarist Tiit Paulus described it⁶. Russian pianist and jazz

6 Author’s Skype interview with Tiit Paulus 18.03.2017.

fan Yuri Vikharev describes the first encounter with Conover in highly affective terms comparing it with orgasm:

“Oh Lord, Conover is here! The legendary Willis Conover, thanks to whom we know so much about jazz. Actually, almost everything! All of it is thanks to him. And suddenly he knows about me, wants to get to know ... This one is not just an orgasm, but something beyond the limits!” (Viharev 2004: 206)

In this sense, such celebrity is analogous with religion due to the tension characterized by the combination of intense emotional involvement and the physical and social remoteness of its object (Rojek 2001: 86). The reasons for such worship are partly embedded in what Paulus described as the closed nature of Soviet society. Jazz Hour and Conover were not just tools providing access to their beloved music but they represented much more. The closed, colourless banality of the Soviet everyday stood in stark contrast to the imaginary world mediated by radio of which Conover became a symbol. This was a part of the paradigm of the symbolic Imaginary West in Soviet society where the longing for western-ness was expressed through numerous acts exercised by Soviet individuals (Yurchak 2006: 193). Those people, both musicians and fans, whose lives were fueled by jazz were predominantly intellectuals with a heightened need for self-actualization and a profound dissatisfaction with what the state had to offer.

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Latvian jazz fan Leonid Nidbalsky

Among numerous jazz fans was Latvian Leonid Nidbalsky – an engineer-constructor whose most famous professional achievement was the invention of the coffee grinder *Straume* – an iconic household item well-known all over the Soviet Union as a symbol of Soviet welfare.

Jazz emerged into Nidbalsky's life in his adolescence during his studies at a paramilitary type of Maritime College where the strange sounds of jazz reached him with the guidance of his friend via Conover's broadcast which they listened together in the loft of the dormitory of the college. This was how Nidbalsky described the listening procedure and Conover's adoration⁷:

“There were huge dormitories for 90 people ... we snuck out of the room at night, took bread and salt with us and went back to the college. Then we climbed up the stairs to the loft where our old pre-war *Telefunken* radio set was hidden. It was totally broken but we managed to find a short wave and there we finally heard the voice of Willis Conover. Those were absolutely strange voices, not like anything else. But I followed these improvisations and later I started to understand the music ... When I finished Maritime College, I was a ready-made jazz man. Conover was for us like Jesus Christ is for religious people. Thanks to him we became acolytes.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky 02.06.2018)

⁷ If not indicated otherwise all the interview material originates from author's interview with Leonid Nidbalsky (b. 1937) on 02.06.2018.

Nidbalsky's jazz interest found realization when he was invited by his future wife working as a Komsomol activist to organize a jazz ensemble at the design institute *Latgiproprom*. The conditions for music activities were poor, as Nidbalsky described in a humorous manner, "there was only a drum set and a guitar when we started. The practice room was tiny – the bass drum kick flew us out of the room..." (*Otkrytyj gorod*. 2/23, 38-41. p. 39). Later Nidbalsky played the drum set and was a manager of Riga's Dixieland.



Picture 1. Riga's Dixieland greeting Willis Conover in his arrival to the Tallinn '67 jazz festival in Tallinn's train station in 1967. From the left: Vladimir Yermolovich bass, Leonid Marukhno banjo, Eduard Klovsky trombone, Leonid Nidbalsky drums, Juris Mutulis clarinet. In the second row: Shirley and Willis Conover. Personal collection of Nidbalsky.

The fulfillment of his ultimate goal – to legalize jazz from its somewhat underground status in Latvia got inspiration from the Tallinn '67 jazz festival, as he said: "When I returned from the festival in Tallinn, I was literally trembling with a desire to do something similar to Tallinn '67 for jazz in Latvia." (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky 02.06.2018).

He made his dream true in 1971⁸ while opening the jazz club *Allegro*. Permission to open a café was obtained at a high party level from the Party secretary of Riga's City Committee Alfrēds Rubiks. Nidbalsky with the Komsomol secretary Karlis Līcis (Līcis) made a great effort to convince Rubiks that the enterprise was not "another *pivnuška* (pub)". To fit the café with ideological requirements, the club had to arrange thematic evenings, celebrating for instance, Lenin's birthday, in parallel with musical evenings (*Otkrytyj gorod*. 2/23, 38-41. p. 39).

⁸ The official opening of the club took place January 23rd.

Finding a name for the café was not easy, as explained by Nidbalsky, “the first name proposed was *Neļķe* (carnation) but proletarnyj cvetok (proletarian flower) – it did not sound good. Then Komsomol insisted on *Liesma* (flame) which could have meant “Komsomol flame burns in our hearts.” Finally, while discussing the club naming at home, his grandmother’s suggestion became decisive: if it is a musical café why not to call it something cheerful – *Allegro*” (*Otkrytyj gorod*, 2/23, 38-41. p. 39).

Legally, the café functioned under the auspices of Komsomol as a recreation centre for youth, according to Nidbalsky,

“In Soviet times you could not just to do something. Everything had to be *pod kryšej* (under the roof) and the *kryša* was the Komsomol. We sold entrance tickets through the Komsomol. There was not a porter standing at the door and letting people inside but an operative group of the Komsomol. Komsomol members were standing at the entrance and did the face control. If you had haircut á la the Beatles, you could not enter. Really...that how it was.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

Jazz evenings in café *Allegro* were terminated soon since the high popularity of the site involved the appearance of speculators teasing with currency which in turn attracted the interest of the KGB. In 1975, the club moved to another location in the Culture House of Builders where the officially registered *Riga Jazz Club* was formed and jazz evenings continued two times a week.

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Picture 2. The group of Raimonds Raubiško playing in *Allegro*. Madars Kalniņš (piano), Viktor Avdjukevič (Viktor Avdiukevič) (bass), Julius Smirnov (sax), Raimonds Kalniņš (drums). Personal collection of Leonid Nidbalsky.



Picture 3. Emblem of café *Allegro*. Personal collection of Nidbalsky.

In 1975, Nidbalsky became an instigator of the jazz festival tradition *Vasaras ritmi* managed for 19 years. The festivals were known because of their use of steamboats as sites of jazz sessions, “The jam sessions were arranged not in the jazz club because some unwanted people could listen to what we were playing and we decided to rent steamboats. We were swimming in the river and played everything we wanted to play,” he explained (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018).

Nidbalsky emphasises the specific tactics which those who organised jazz events had to apply. The keyword here was *soglasovat'* (approve) – negotiating with the necessary authorities to gain permits. The following is a lengthy excerpt describing the process of negotiation for gaining approval for concert programs in the conditions of missing regulations and incompetency of officials:

“If some jazz collective wanted to play in our club, I had to draw up the programme list. With this programme in hand, I had to run to the Ministry of Culture. There the comrades who didn’t know anything about jazz looked and said, “Well why are there so many foreign composers and not any local people on the list?” And then I wrote down some fictional titles or names. All our work this time was about how to outwit obstructions. Those obstructions unfortunately were not law-based. Nowadays, there is a law, you read it and you know this is what you can do and this is what you cannot do. In Soviet times, by law, you could do almost everything but, in practice, you could do almost nothing. We lived during a time when we always had to make sure our hands were clean, or to generally be careful. At any moment somebody could denounce you, write something to somebody. There were several complaints made about me.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

Partly because of the purpose to facilitate the process of negotiation with *aparātčiki* (party functionaries) Nidbalsky joined the communist Party.

“It is difficult to understand now but then everything related to culture had to be negotiated with the governing body. Before I could arrange a festival there were numerous consents. Decisions were made by the people who

never heard the name John Coltrane. They did not know anything about jazz, but they said no, this music should not be played. But when you had a party card then it was much easier to knock on the door of those people.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

Illuminating are Nidbalsky’s insights on Soviet jazz fandom, which functioned as an affective community consolidating people all over the Soviet Union. Jazz fans, the people with this shared passion, saw themselves distinguishing from the masses and possessing the elite status contrasting those who disliked jazz and considered jazz as a music sounding worse than “scratching glass with something sharp.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018). An important symbolic element of group identification for fans was clothing, as Nidbalsky’s detailed account indicates.

“If you played jazz music you had to wear a shirt that had a button-down collar⁹ and the buttons should have four holes. If you didn’t have a button-down collar, you were not one of us. The shirt had to have a certain form with a stitched front placket. And jackets had to be special ... very long with two buttons and without a lining. If you did not have this, you were not a real jazzman. Shoes had to be special too. They were called *tufli s razgovorom* [a pattern with holes on the toe]. They had to be raspberry pink with black toes. If you went on the stage with this type of clothing, you were a real jazz man ... but of course you had to know how to play jazz. Then you were a member of our sect. Leningrad jazz musicians were real jazz men, like Konstantin Nosov, Gennady Golshtein.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

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The dress code served as a significant element of networking all over the Soviet Union and as an external marker of identification of membership of the “jazz sect”:

“If I arrived in Novosibirsk, for instance, went to the restaurant ... and suddenly heard somebody playing saxophone. When I saw a “button-down”, it meant he was one of us. I approached him and said a couple of phrases. He saw that I too have “button-down”. After that he would definitely invite me to stay overnight. It was like a brotherhood.” (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

In the Soviet conditions of extreme scarcity, the keyword for obtaining consumer goods was *dostat’* (procure):

“There was nothing to buy and you had to be acquainted with important people in order to *dostat’* necessary goods. The outfit of the jazz fan had to be American. In the Soviet era there was a total deficit in everything. If you went to a store, there were suits only of one colour. But the real people bought their clothes from the *komissionnyj magazin*¹⁰ second-hand commission shop. We

9 A button-down shirt has buttons on the collar holding the flaps of the collar down.

10 The term is not an equivalent to the current meaning of second hand stores. The original word *komissionnyj magazin* in Russian or *komisjoni kauplus* in Estonian meant a shop where the goods, both used and new, were sold under commission, where individuals could sell goods and the store took a commission for the service.

had three of those in Riga. In the mornings where new American products appeared on sale we jazzmen met in the commission store and greeted each other. It was a kind of entertainment for us. When you watched TV there was news about how much *kolhozniki* harvested corn or some tractor operators fulfilled the socialist plan. But we did not want to listen to that...we wanted something different...something alive. My wife for instance sewed the clothes by herself." (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

The great affection of America and its music by the entire Soviet jazz community was a fulfillment of their type of the American Dream expressed in the adoration of Conover, a deep love for jazz, and an idealization of America as a cult-like paradise. Why this phenomenon occurred after the WWII is opened by Nidbalsky:

"There was deep poverty at the end of 1940s. We had nothing to eat and suddenly American food appeared before us ... we had never eaten anything like that in our lives before. All those American military cars, food, music, appeared before us ... it was our life saver. We were not involved in politics and were not interested. Our point of interest was culture and music. We didn't really know much about America at that time – in our news they said that they are hanging black people there. But America symbolised the entire West for us at that time. America appeared to us first of all through popular music." (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

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The final thoughts of Nidbalsky reflect the particularities of life in Soviet era in the light of his own path towards self-actualization, which, in fact, was the purpose for all those who dedicated their lives to jazz.

"I think not everything was awful in the Soviet times ... there were people who could realise themselves in any condition. Yes, life was brutal but most importantly you could exist differently in parallel to this life. It was possible to exist within this culture in your own way, just don't shout "Down with the Soviet Union." It was possible to open a jazz club and listen to American music. You could spend your life just watching TV or playing football or hockey. I wanted to live with full energy. I was involved with jazz, which nobody really needed ... it was not popular at all ... it was just for fans, enthusiasts. My wife ... she supported me in this. She was such a gift for me." (H. Reimann, interview with Leonid Nidbalsky, 02.06.2018)

Final notes

Previous observations have suggested that the formation of Soviet jazz fandom was part of the socio-cultural processes of the era facilitating the appearance of a new Soviet intelligentsia or *šestidesâtniki* and liberating the atmosphere to allow the reappearance of Western cultural forms such as jazz. Fandom was an elitist engagement and the carrier of a collective generational identity characterized by high moral qualities and the appreciation of certain human categories. Although the activities of jazz fans can be

considered part of the building of “socialism with a human face” or more particularly “socialism with a jazz face”, there is a reason to be cautious about accepting this argument entirely. Jazz activism did not function directly in the state sponsored cultural framework. In addition, hardly any of those involved with jazz fandom ever thought about their enthusiasm in terms of developing socialism despite having jobs exclusively in the state framework and in many cases benefitting their status in the party membership as the case of Leonid Nidbalsky demonstrated. Jazz fandom was instead, motivated by a universal type of human aspiration such as the human tendency to seek miracles and authority, the escapism in the intelligentsia and a desire for self-actualization.

Soviet jazz fandom demonstrates a number of similarities with fandom in general. Russians, like their counterparts, were involved in affective engagement, self-expression and cult-like practices. There are, however, several traits that make Soviet fandom special. The affiliation of participants with the social class of intellectuals limited fandom as an elitist phenomenon in an elitist position in relation to mass culture. Religiosity, a frequently contested subject in fandom studies, seemed neither to relate to worshipping musicians nor receiving spiritual fulfillment merely from listening to music, but the Soviet context showed fans obtaining spiritual fulfillment through being part of a religious-like community shaping the identity of devotees and worshipping the radio broadcaster Willis Conover—the mediator, making jazz available to Soviet listeners living with limited access to recordings. Finally, Soviet jazz fans were not just passive consumers of the culture. They were active developers of the entire jazz culture, involved in numerous jazz activities, creating infrastructures and preserving its history. In that sense, the Soviet jazz fan demonstrated close links to jazz aficionados—knowledgeable people, specialists who not only listen to jazz, but also take an active part in the development of the genre.

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