



LITHUANIAN JAZZ IN THE 1960s–1980s: THE SEARCH FOR AN ORIGINAL MUSICAL LANGUAGE

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This article is a retrospective of the development of jazz in Lithuania from local jazz bands in the 1960s to Lithuanian jazz masters in the 1980s. The article discusses how from the times of the Khrushchev Thaw, which began after Stalin's death in 1953, up to Gorbachev's perestroika, jazz was considered a phenomenon unacceptable to Soviet ideology and alien to Lithuanian culture. This article also looks at how the Iron Curtain and the period of long cultural isolation, the turmoil of the perestroika and the years of the national revival did not seem to interrupt the development of jazz. On the contrary, jazz took root in the realm of Soviet culture. Musicians with academic training began to play it, and it came to be identified with a manifestation of extraordinary creativity, entitled to employ even the most radical means of musical expression. This article is devoted to jazz festivals in Lithuania and dedicated to those Lithuanian free jazz musicians, the bands, performers, and composers of the period that continue to bring fame to Lithuanian jazz worldwide. The article has been written analysing music records, catalogues, books, periodicals and interviews of contemporaries from the 1960s to the 1980s.

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Atslėgvārdi: lietuviešu džezs, Lietuvos Populārās mūzikas orķestris, Viļņas džezs klubs, *Ganelina trio*, *Vladimira Čekasina bigbends*, *Petra Višņauska kvartets*, *Melodija*, Viļņas ierakstu studija.

Introduction

Jazz came to Lithuania rather late and was officially considered the music of the opposition to the Soviet regime, an unwelcome expression of free spirit and worldview. In the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse, semi-underground jazz scene existed in Lithuania and various Soviet Union towns. During the Soviet period, this became a way of life, a kind of refuge for people of a freer spirit, a world in which the form of communication was the language of Aesop.

The culture of those who refused to conform was that of the underground or semi-underground – art, poetry, music, and *samizdat* literature. The Baltic countries in the consciousness of people of those times remained more Western, marked by the experience of independence in the interwar period. According to contemporaries, creative work there was hindered to a lesser degree (R. Skudienė, *Lithuanian Music Link*, 2016, No 19, p. 11).

The Iron Curtain could not cut off the Soviet Union from the rest of the world. The primitive Bolshevik slogans about jazz and the betrayal of the motherland no longer worked. Even the ideologically inspired culture did not fail to develop. And, it did develop in its way, autonomously, and paradoxically in an innovative fashion.

In the early 1960s, Bolshevik party ideologues called jazz “the music of the fatties”, “mud falling into the clear spring water” – it was risky to play jazz or to be called a jazz orchestra. In the article *O buvo taip* (It was like this), the musicologist Liudas Šaltenis (1941–1994) wrote:

“Party leaders checked the halls of Vilnius and Kaunas restaurants looking for musicians playing the saxophone as the instrument had fallen into disgrace with them. The names of Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Count Basie and other renowned jazzmen, but not their music, disappeared from the orchestras’ repertoire. Only the music of George Gershwin, an expatriate from Russia, could be officially played.” (L. Šaltenis, *Publika*. 1992, No. 3–4)

Lithuanian Popular Music Orchestra

After WW2, performers of light music who had not left the country because of political changes gathered in Kaunas. The time was turbulent so it is not surprising that so little is known about the once-famous jazz orchestra – *Juozas Tiškus Big Band*.

In 1955, a student big band gathered at the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute led by Juozas Tiškus (1929–2006), an accordionist, keyboardist, arranger and composer. Their first concert took place in 1955 (L. Šaltenis. *Literatūra ir menas*, 19.03.1988).

In 1957, the big band became the Youth Orchestra of the Kaunas City Culture Department and participated in the 6th World Festival of Democratic Youth and Students in Moscow (in the selection for the festival program it took 4th place among 17 competitors). Besides other famous performers, *Michel Legrand Big Band* and *Krzysztof Komeda’s Sextet* participated in the festival.

According to Tiškus, the experience gained was invaluable: they met real jazzmen, obtained original scores and parts of the Karel Vlach and his Orchestra, and had an opportunity to professionally analyse jazz music. The conductor began to study the arrangement schools of Glenn Miller’s Method of Orchestral Arranging and Henry Mancini’s arrangement studio and developed a highly successful program called *Festival Souvenirs* (A. Listavičiūtė, *Muzikos barai*, 08.07.2002, p. 54).

In the spring of 1958, *Lietuvos estradinis orkestras* (LEO; the Lithuanian Popular Music Orchestra) was established at the Philharmonic Society. As there was a great lack of good jazz performers, the conductor became interested in jazzmen in Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, and Leningrad, Moscow, and Kazan. To improve the orchestra (with 5 saxophones, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, rhythm section), in search of artists, the conductor even went to circus performances to listen to the orchestras playing there (Jakutis 2008: 45). In the 1960s, the LEO became one of the best orchestras in the Soviet Union and

was compared to the famous *Oleg Lundstrem Jazz Orchestra*. During one concert, the orchestra performed 12–14 of the most complex standards for orchestra by Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Quincy Jones, and Benny Golson. The other part of the program was devoted to the music of light genres by Lithuanian composers Benjaminas Gorbulskis, Vygandas Telksnys, Mikas Vaitkevičius, and others. Before 1966, the LEO had given over 1,200 concerts in many cities of the Soviet Union achieving great mastery (Šaltenis 1983: 18).



1. Lithuanian Popular Music orchestra, c. 1963. Juozas Tiškus archive

Still, the orchestra's leader constantly felt the pressure. Specially commissioned sharply critical articles of the orchestra's repertoire appeared in the press, and it was claimed that jazz was alien to Soviet Lithuanian culture (R. Žigaitis, *Vakarinės naujienos*, 31.01.1963).

Even in Russia, it was not officially possible to be called a jazz orchestra, although such orchestras as Eddie Rozner's (called the White Louis Armstrong), who later took over half of the LEO musicians (Jakutis 2008: 41), and Oleg Lundstrem's, were called jazz bands for some time. The names of many foreign composers were not mentioned in the concert programs, the authors and the titles of the works played were changed or invented¹. With an intensive change in the composition of the orchestra, the LEO transformed into the *Estradinės melodijos* (Light Music Melodies) ensemble which gave concerts until 1986. Encouraged by the LEO's creative activities, the big bands of

1 Similar "practices" were applied in other Soviet republics. Politicized youth control in all areas "inspired the "false name" strategy, a widespread tactic among jazz musicians, where well-known jazz standards were transcribed to Russian names or translated into Russian; some anecdotal examples include Benny Goodman becoming Benjamin Godunov, Count Basie – Konstantin Basjov, and Duke Ellington – Dusja Ellingtonov. As the inspectors were usually Komsomol or Communist Party functionaries with no musical education who knew nothing about jazz, this method was quite effective" – Tiit Lauk, Estonia (see: *The History of European jazz*: 550).

Šiauliai, *Kaunas Oktava* and the *Nemunas žiburiai* orchestras, which later became *Lietuvos estradinis ansamblis* (LEA, the Lithuanian Light Music Ensemble), were established.

In the 1950s, the composition of jazz orchestras was formed by musicians migrating from one continent or country to another. The change of performers promoted new, higher-quality forms and possibilities of music, and provoked the progress and creativity of improvisation. A similar process of the formation of big bands took place during the years of the LEO's existence within the framework of the Soviet Union. At that time, it was still difficult for the Lithuanian musicians to perform the complex repertoire of the jazz orchestra. Thus, Juozas Tiškus created the famous big band of the best musicians from the Soviet Union and made Lithuania's name famous with this ensemble that was called the *Lithuanian Light Music Orchestra* undoubtedly deserves the title of the pioneer of Lithuanian jazz.

At the end of the 1950s, like-minded people and jazz fans gathered on the premises of Vilnius University. It is notable that not musicians but students of other specialties – physicians, economists, chemists, physicists – were the ones interested in this genre. Jonas Cijūnėlis (1926–2015), a universal musician, jazz promoter and multi-instrumentalist, who returned from exile in Siberia, joined amateur art activities. He formed a pop orchestra (big band) from the most talented performers with music education from the university's wind orchestra. The first big band concert took place in 1958 at the University Assembly Hall. The big band of the University of Tartu that gave a concert in 1959 at the invitation of Vilnius University performed the compositions of the Estonian composer Uno Naissoo in the swing style. The musicians of both universities established a close relationship; the Vilnius musicians received professional jazz arrangements and advice from the Estonian performers. All were impressed by the big band septet *HARVLEK* that played impressively in the style of cool jazz. After the Estonian visit, Cijūnėlis established the *VU Swing Quintet* (later a sextet) with the most talented musicians: Julius Šivickis (clarinet, tenor saxophone) Rimantas Derkintis (piano), Jonas Laimutis Martinkėnas (accordion), Rimantas Žeimys (guitar), Jurgis Oleka (bass), and Eugenijus Sokolovas (drums). The sextet became very popular, it played dance music not only at Vilnius University, but also at the Conservatory and the Art Institute, and also gave concerts.

In 1959, the sextet won a competition to play in the newly established, later legendary, *Neringa Café* in Vilnius. The attitude of architects Algimantas Nasvytis and Vytautas Nasvytis was that only modern music should be performed in this café with a modern interior (Jonušaitė 2014: 53). In the big hall with a stage, students, young people and high-ranking Soviet officials liked to sit – the visitors of the café liked the ensemble, although it did not play dance music, but almost exclusively jazz compositions. Later several generations of musicians played on the stage of *Neringa Café* – from traditional swing enthusiasts to free jazz promoters. In the texts of some foreign authors about jazz in Lithuania, *Neringa Café* has become a picturesque metaphor, describing the special atmosphere of this place in the 1960s and 1970s (J. Sawic, *Kultūros barai*, 2021, No. 3, p. 39; Matzner 2018: 2013).

Vilnius Jazz Club

In December 1961, an event that was called the birthday of Lithuanian jazz by musicologist Liudas Šaltenis took place at the Conservatory (now the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre) in Vilnius in which three ensembles gave concerts – Gediminas Narijauskas Dixieland, the quintet of Liudas Šaltenis and Eugenijus Puidokas as well as Vyacheslav Ganelin and Remigijus Pilypaitis modern jazz quartet. The concert crowned a three-day cycle of lectures dedicated to jazz by the Conservatory Students' Scientific Society (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 19.03.1988). This event was like an introduction to the activities of the Vilnius Jazz Club. According to Oleg Molokoedov, a pianist and author of articles on the development of Lithuanian jazz, in addition to other musicians, the ensembles' participants in the above-mentioned evening at the conservatory also gathered at the venue, and it paved the way for the original style of the Vilnius jazz school.



2. *Vilnius Jazz Club* poster, 1964. Artist Algimantas Reimeris

The *Vilnius Jazz Club* opened on 13 March 1963. It was a café-cum-reading hall for young people on L. Giros g. 22 (now Vilniaus g. 22) that had opened a year before (R. Žilevičius, *Vakarinės naujienos*, 05.07.1962). The space was small, and narrow, accommodating just 50 to 60 visitors. There was a Steinway piano on the stage, a bar at the end of the hall. Lectures, meetings, and other events were supplemented by music from tape recorders and records (P. Keidošus, *Tėvynės balsas*, 1964 Oct, No. 84).

The calendar of events was compiled by a 15-member council chaired by a city Komsomol instructor. The cafe frequented by young people was called *čitalka* (in Russ. reading-hall) (Pocevičius 2018: 821). It was open at 10 AM, and in the evenings, poetry recitals and meetings with artists and foreign guests took place. The press reviews emphasized the “educational” atmosphere of the café and the fight against “bad taste” led by the council².

The audience of the cafe, and especially of the jazz club, were representatives of the generation of the liberating Fifties and Sixties. Traditionally, every Monday, lectures on the history of jazz and the most outstanding performers were given; recordings were played, music was performed, and meetings and jam sessions with the then known musicians from Hungary, Poland, Georgia and Japan were organised (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 19.03.1988). Lithuanian jazz veterans still remember the impressive jam session with the musicians of the orchestra led by Sadao Watanabe, a saxophonist from Japan (Molokoedov 2001: 220).

In 1964, the first concert of the big band formed by Vyacheslav Ganelin (*Vâčeslav Ganélin*, 1944) took place and was dedicated to the work of trumpet player Louis Armstrong; many other memorable events were held there at that time. The club existed in Vilnius until 1966. Probably, reports about the club’s activities were also submitted to the Lithuanian Komsomol Committee and the KGB; the activities and events received various evaluations from cultural functionaries. Closed for “renovation”, the *Vilnius Jazz Club*, as an unprofitable institution, did not resume its activities.

Jazz festivals

The first jazz festival in the Soviet period took place in 1949 in Tallinn, Estonia. The Tallinn Festival won international recognition for Lithuanian musicians – the early *Ganelin’s Trio*³ won diplomas in 1965, 1966 and 1967. The respectable jazz commentator Will Conover from *The Voice of America* did a radio program on Ganelin. In 1966, Algirdas Vizgirda was acclaimed as the best flutist of the festival. In 1967, Oleg Molokoedov was awarded a diploma for the best folk song *Voverèlè* (Little squirrel) arrangement. The prize-winning piece *Legend* was based on a simple Lithuanian folk melody originally built on the first four degrees of the minor scale. The motif was later used in Leningrad’s film on Tallinn ’67 (Reimann 2022: 70).

The pinnacle of the Tallinn Festival was reached in 1967, when in the packed Kalev Sports Hall beside performers from Lithuania – the *Ganelin Trio* and the *Oleg Molokoedov Quartet* – and other famous foreign musicians, the renowned *Charles Lloyd Quartet* from the USA also performed.

2 “They (the council - R. S.) know that jazz is not just distorted faces or twisted hands, that there is jazz and jazz, that there is entertaining and commercial jazz, that we are for the former and the latter is foreign to us.” (P. Keidošus, *Tėvynės balsas*, 1964 Oct, No. 84)

3 Ganelin (piano), Juozas Rumelaitis (double-bass), Aleksandras Melnikas (drums)

“We (the *Ganelin Trio* – R. S.) were performing just before Lloyd. When we were told that the Americans would follow us...well, I didn't care. Later we were told that we were similar in style. But, I think Lloyd played his music and I played mine' ...we had a chance to hear for the first time live the type of music Lloyd and Jarrett played and their new approach to musical material... this freedom...it was a real shock for me. I felt that after Lloyd first inhaled, for the next forty minutes he did not inhale again...you were taken into the flow. It was like therapy.” (Reimann 2022: 70)

All the same, the manifestations of free thought connected to jazz were too obvious and shortly after that, the Tallinn Festival was closed down.

On 26 and 27 April 1968, the jazz festival *Jaunystė 68 (Youth '68)* was held in Elektrėnai. It had been decided to organize the festival in Lithuania at the end of 1967 when it transpired that the Tallinn Festival, which had become a jazz Mecca, was banned. Many musicians had experienced the exceptional significance of this festival, the opportunity to realise their creative ambitions, break out of the club environment, perform on a big stage and communicate more freely. The closure of the Tallinn Festival was a big blow to the development of jazz throughout the Soviet Union until the late 1970s. Following the events of the 1967 festival, which received wide coverage in the world and gained a political dimension, there were alarming rumours about the repressions in Tallinn, and the fate of its organizers was unknown.

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Organizing a festival in Lithuania was not so easy. It was feared that the central government in Moscow would ban it. Fortunately, jazz music was still officially assigned to the youth audiences, so the Komsomol took over the “patronage” of the event, only on one condition: to exclusively invite Soviet performers and to organize the festival outside Vilnius or Kaunas. The town of Elektrėnai, a symbol of energy, was chosen: its foundation started in 1961 together with the construction of the most powerful Lithuanian power plant of that time. The town inhabitants – young engineers and workers who had come for construction from all over the Soviet Union were would-be audiences. It would have been difficult to find a more suitable venue for the event at that time (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 19.03.1988). According to Viktoras Voronovas, director of the Elektrėnai Culture House, a saxophonist, arranger, and leader of the ensemble Volta and the jazz quartet, who was also one of the festival organisers, a miracle happened – the first jazz festival was held in Lithuania. The festival lasted for two days with ten bands participating: musicians from Vilnius, Klaipėda, Kaunas, and Elektrėnai as well as guest performers from Riga and Moscow⁴.

The participants' performances were original and masterful. The concerts were recorded at the Vilnius record studio⁵. Original compositions of Ganelin's and Žilionis'

4 Vilnius was represented by *Vâčeslav Ganėlin Trio*, *Vâčeslav Ganėlin and Aleksandr Gilman quartet*, *Oleg Molokoedov and Algirdas Vizgirda quartet*, *Oleg Molokoedov trio*, soloist Stasys Povilaitis, and *Vincas Žilionis quartet*; the ensemble *Žerutis* lead by Teodoras Kareckas came from Klaipėda, *Litauras Bielionis sextet* – from Kaunas; *Viktoras Voronovas quartet* was from Elektrėnai. *Raimonds Raubiško and Gunars Rozenbergs quartet* was from Riga; *Evgenii Gevorkian trio* came from Moscow.

5 *Melodiya*, 33D-025706, mono, 1968

bands were immortalised in the recordings and covered by the press. The music style of the *Raubiško and Rozenbergs' Quartet* was compared to the style of the American saxophonist Ornette Coleman. *Viktor Voronov Quartet* was the discovery of the festival – it performed a program similar to free jazz (Molokoedov 2001: 220). The festival *Jaunystė* did not become a traditional event. There was a lack of support and experience, and enthusiasm faded. A year later, in 1969, a jazz festival was held at Vilnius State University, but interest in this kind of music was waning. In the world, the “youth music bomb” exploded – the hearts and feelings of young people were in rock (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 19.03.1988). In 1977, with the establishment of the jazz section at the House of Artists in Vilnius, discussions on the revival of the *Elektrėnai Jazz Festival* in one of the Lithuanian cities became more frequent. Although jazz was tolerated in Lithuania at that time, it was still episodically performed at restaurants, cafes, popular music festivals *Baltijos jaunystė* (Baltic Youth), *Gintarinė triūba* (Amber Trumpet), and in the State Philharmonic Hall.

After a twelve-year interval, the history of the first festival, which later became traditional, took an unexpected turn. In 1980, a long-awaited stage for jazz appeared at the House of Culture in the resort town of Birštonas. Zigmās Vileikis, a graduate of the Klaipėda faculties of the State Conservatory, was appointed to work for the Culture Department of the city municipality, and successfully solved organizational issues (L. Šaltenis, *Kultūros barai*, No.7, 1988, 18–20).

The first *Birštonas Jazz Festival* took place on 1 and 2 November 1980. It was dedicated to the 16th Communist Party Congress and World Youth Day, but no one worried about it – such formal dedications were necessary. The most important thing was that finally in Lithuania there was a place where jazz could be played freely.

The first festivals were held on an amateur basis, the musicians received no remuneration. All those who wanted to perform on the stage in Birštonas needed to participate in auditions held by the organizers, and the repertoire was not regulated. Therefore, many new compositions by Lithuanian performers were played there (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 10.03.1982). A tradition to hold the festival every two years in the spring, on the last weekend of March started. Thanks to the creative and professional contacts and clever strategy of the organizers, Lithuanian composers, famous jazz critics and musicians from Leningrad, Moscow, Riga, and Yerevan visited and served on the jury panel in Birštonas: Vladimir Feyertag (*Vladimir Fejertag*), Alexei Batashev (*Aleksej Batašev*), Konstantin Orbelian (*Konstantin Orbelân*), and Yuri Saulsky (*Ūrij Saul'skij*). Until 1994, the festival was sponsored by musicologist Liudas Šaltenis (d. 1994), one of the initiators of the event, who then worked for the Ministry of Culture of Lithuania.

The authority of the abovementioned musicians gave the festival protection during the Soviet era – it eventually grew into an important international event. In the 1980s to be interested in jazz, the more so in playing it, was not only in vogue and a progressive viewpoint: it testified to a certain internal freedom and opposition to Soviet

ideology. When perestroika started, jazz buffs from all over Lithuania and other cities of the Soviet Union used to gather in Birštonas. Eight Lithuanian bands and Estonian composer and pianist Tõnu Naissoo took part in the festival in 1980. Naissoo won the public award; the trio of saxophonist Alexander Fedotov was the winner: Fedotov (alto saxophone), Gintautas Abarius (piano), and Rubin Vain (bass). The organizers called the first festival a “festival of enthusiasts”, a forum with a wide range of jazz – from free jazz to traditional swing compositions (L. Šaltenis, *Literatūra ir menas*, 14.01.1981).

In the spring of 1982, the festival lasted three days. The major part of the program consisted of performances by Lithuanian musicians. The only guest musician was the quartet of saxophonist and teacher Raimonds Raubiško from Latvia. The culmination of the festival was the concert of the *Petras Vyšniauskas Quartet*: Vyšniauskas (alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, Vytautas Labutis (reeds), Leonidas Šinkarenka (bass), and Gediminas Laurinavičius (drums). The quartet won the Grand Prix and the public award, their performance stood out with their original compositions and virtuosity.

Much had changed over the two years before the third *Birštonas Festival* in 1984: Lithuanian performers became known not only to Soviet audiences. The achievements of the *Vyšniauskas Quartet* were impressive: the laureate of the VII Pop Artists' Competition in Moscow (1983), concerts in Finland, and awards at the Dnipropetrovsk and Vitebsk jazz festivals. *The Ganelin* trio gained international fame; it performed in Western Europe and released albums. Seven concerts were held at the 1986 festival. A large group of the youngest jazz musicians performed⁶. The Grand Prix went to the State Conservatory Jazz Orchestra led by Chekasin and the Balys Dvarionas Children's Music School Ensemble (see the picture on the next page).

There was a lot of vocal jazz. The 1988 festival surpassed the previous ones in the abundance of performers and the musicians' professionalism (O. Sotnikovas, *Kultūros barai*, No. 7, 1988, 20–22).

Then, the first jazz ensemble from abroad performed – the ensemble of the Polish jazz legend Zbigniew Namysłowski: Namysłowski (alto saxophone), Artur Dutkiewicz (piano), Jacek Niedziela (double-bass), and Piotr Biskupski (drums). The guest musicians were escorted to the stage with bodyguards (sic!), and their performance became the culmination of the festival. The Grand Prix went to the *Gintautas Abarius Quartet*: Aleksandras Fedotovas (alto saxophone), Abarius (piano), Giedrius Čekuolis (bass), and Arkadijus Gotesmanas (drums). The most prominent festival performers were recorded at the Vilnius record studio and albums of the festival's concert recordings were released (1982, 1986, 1988).

The *Birštonas Festival* also took place in 1990, shortly after Lithuania declared its restoration of independence on 11 March. This time, the organizers did not invite the jury, there was no Grand Prix, but the festival became international for the first time

⁶ In 1975, the Lithuanian State Conservatory (now the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre) in Vilnius and its faculties in Klaipėda, the Juozas Tallat-Kelpša Higher School of Music and the Balys Dvarionas Children's Music School opened departments of popular music where the basics of jazz was taught.



3. Vilnius Balys Dvarionas Children's Music School ensemble at the *Birštonas jazz festival*. On the left: leader Vladimir Chekasin, 1986. Photo: Albertas Švenčionis.

after Lithuania regained its independence. From the autumn of 1987, festivals were held in other Lithuanian cities as well: jazz choirs and ensembles *Sing Group Jazz Festival* in Panevėžys, and the *Jazz Forum* in Vilnius (known as *Vilnius Jazz* since 1989).

The annual *Vilnius Jazz* is now one of the major international festivals of new European jazz as well as being one of the longest-running events in Lithuanian jazz. The emergence of this festival in 1987 (organized by Antanas Gustys) coincided with the National Revival movement in Lithuania. Foreign critics regard it as a musical focal point in Eastern Europe, exerting an influence on contemporary jazz trends. *Vilnius Jazz* is included in the catalogues of world jazz events: the *Eurofile Music Industry Directory*, *Music & Media*, the *Jazz Times Annual Festival Directory* (USA) and is a constant member of the *European Jazz Network*. Since its first editions, *Vilnius Jazz* has been noted for its somewhat radical and innovative character. In addition to jazz and free improvisational music, academic, ethnic, rock and industrial music expand the festival's range (Skudienė, 2018: 532).

The first *Kaunas Jazz Festival* took place on 19–21 April 1991. It was Molokoedov and a small group of enthusiasts gathered by producer Jonas Jučas. It gradually became the country's biggest jazz festival, and the biggest event in Kaunas.

The Ganelin Trio

The Ganelin Trio (Vyacheslav Ganelin (*Vâčeslav Ganélin*), Vladimir Chekasin (*Vladimir Čekasin*) and Vladimir Tarasov) was the only widely recognized jazz ensemble in Vilnius in the 1970s.

“The trio led by Vyacheslav Ganelin became famous so quickly that the audience did not immediately realise that its applause records a completely new trend in the development of jazz.” (A. Batashev, *Literatūra ir menas*, 13.08.1983.)

Vyacheslav Ganelin spent ten years looking for equal partners. The new ensemble was born in 1969. Ganelin and Vladimir Tarasov made their debut with the program *Opus à 2* at jazz festivals in Gorky and Donetsk in 1970. Vladimir Chekasin, a saxophone player from Sverdlovsk, joined the duo in 1971. From 1971 on, the Trio prepared new large programs annually as if affirming their ground-breaking artistic explorations. The first programs – *Consilium*, *Triptych*, *Postludium*, *Ad libitum*, *Ex libris* – made a strong impression on jazz aficionados and were ardently discussed among the critics and listeners alike.

In 1974, the *Ganelin Trio* was granted the status of a contemporary chamber music ensemble of the Lithuanian State Philharmonic, which made it easier to get permission to participate in festivals in the Soviet Union. The trio was one of the few Soviet jazz ensembles that performed in Eastern and Western Europe, Cuba, India, and the USA; they also performed at the *Jazz Jamboree*, *Pori Jazz*, the *North Sea Jazz Festival*, *Jazz Yatra*, etc. The Trio's program *Poco a poco* performed at the *Jazz Jamboree* festival in Poland in 1976, receiving the highest acclaim from critics and listeners alike. The Polish press wrote:

“The performance of the Soviet jazz trio was the biggest surprise. It proved that we have been waiting for this trio's performance for several years not in vain. The contemporary chamber music ensemble of the Lithuanian State Philharmonic ... is one of the most fascinating ensembles in the entirety of Europe. Theirs is intuitive music, free jazz, grounded in traditions.” (*Express Wieczorny*, 03.11.1976)

A mix of musical styles and cultures, new forms, an inclination towards plastic art, collaborative authorship, multi-instrumentalism, disclaiming the dichotomy of the soloist and the accompanist – all these characteristics make the Trio close to the first performers of free jazz, and the *Art Ensemble of Chicago*. The Trio's music was compared to the compositions by Anthony Braxton.

The instrumentation of the Trio included about 20 different instruments: Ganelin played the piano, bass keyboard, synthesizer, percussion, guitar and drums; Tarasov used to equip himself with an array of percussion instruments, sometimes would even blow a whistle or trumpet; Chekasin played the flute, clarinets, various saxophones, and, like Roland Kirk, often employed two instruments simultaneously, he also played

the violin. At times the musicians broadened traditional instrumentation by employing various non-musical instruments. The percussion section was especially rich (Skudienė, Listavičiūtė 2003). The Trio's program *Con anima* was recorded in the Vilnius Recording Studio in 1976 and released in 1977.



4. The Ganelin trio. On the left: Vladimir Chekasin, Vladimir Tarasov, Viacheslav Ganelin, 1976. Photo: Gregory Talas

The second program, *Concerto grosso*, caused an uproar in the *Melodiya* Art Council in Moscow. The direction in defiance of any avant-garde manifestations was shocked by such a radical musical concept. All the divisions of *Melodiya* were ordered to “control” ideological and artistic aspects of music recorded. This record was not released until three years later.

In the 1970s, the *Vilnius Recording Studio* (a branch of *Melodiya*, the state-owned major record company of the Soviet Union) was a progressive, creative recording laboratory for musicians of all genres (Skudienė, *Lithuanian Music Link*, No 20, 2017 p. 22–27). By 1985, the Trio had created 19 programs and released 43 records (LPs and CDs) distributed around the world. The musicians were well aware of the difference between studio recordings and live concerts: programs devised for recording were calculated in detail, while those meant for live concerts did not lack “theatrical jazz” flavour or spontaneity⁷.

⁷ It is necessary to mention extremely valuable releases of the company *Melodiya* recorded in Vilnius studio: Ganelin's musical (*Devil's Bride*) (1974); records of his pop songs (1983); Chekasin's suite *Prisiminimai* (Memories, 1986); solo percussion by Tarasov programs Atto I–IV (1984, 1987, 1989, 1990) and the legendary big band program of the Lithuanian State Conservatory led by Chekasin *A možno li tak?* (Is this possible?) recorded during the *Osemmije ritmy '86* (Autumn rhythms) festival in Leningrad (1987). And this is only a small part of the creative activities of these talented musicians.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Ganelin Trio toured intensively, receiving international acclaim. Ernst Joachim Berendt, the renowned German jazz expert, claimed that the Trio plays "... the most organised and the most professional free jazz I have had a chance to hear"⁸. The trio was the first professional jazz ensemble from the Soviet Union to perform in America in 1986, the homeland of jazz. A unique factor in the Trio's creative work was the attention paid by the small independent British record label Leo Records⁹.

The *Trio's* music can be correlated with contemporary art on two levels – expressive means and aesthetics. The Trio's music is a unique artistic discovery, stemming from the well-rounded education, erudition, uniqueness and artistry of the musicians (R. Skudienė, *Lithuanian Music Link*, 2016, No 19: 17).

The Lithuanian Conservatoire Jazz Orchestra Chekasin's Quartets

In the early 1970s, an optional jazz class was established at the pop music department of the Lithuanian State Conservatoire. Everyone wishing to play music of this genre came together in a big band led by the multi-instrumentalist Vladimir Chekasin, a member of the Ganelin Trio, which was officially called the Jazz orchestra of the Lithuanian State Conservatoire (R. Skudienė, *Lithuanian Music Link*, 2016, No 19: 17). While working with students, he developed an effective method of teaching the technique of jazz and orchestral playing. The orchestra mainly played jazz standards at their sessions. Chekasin found an intriguing way of blending traditional and contemporary jazz into a uniform, colorful texture. Rehearsals of the big band were always noted for their creative atmosphere and became a laboratory of most radical ideas. His artistic pursuits were manifested in a lively program collage with a witty title *Is this possible?* The program consisted of original arrangements of popular standards, compositions by Duke Ellington, Neal Hefti, Vyacheslav Ganelin, Arūnas Navakas and the head of the orchestra himself, interspersed with spontaneous tsunamis of Chekasin-style clusters, unexpected consonances and linkups of different groups of instruments of the big band. The juxtaposition of different styles, manners and epochs was used for good purposes.

In less than five years, Chekasin brought together a group of students and colleagues that still constitute the elite of Lithuanian jazz. The students' orchestra began to play on par with the best big bands in the Soviet Union. Having finished their studies, the students of the talented teacher worked all over Lithuania. The saxophonists Petras Vyšniauskas and Vytautas Labutis were soloists of the orchestra besides Chekasin himself and his talented students. The rhythmical group consisted of the members of the first quartet: the pianist Oleg Molokoedov, the percussionist Gediminas

8 Down Beat. 1980, USA

9 Leonid Feigin, the company's founder, an immigrant from Russia and now on the other side of the Iron Curtain, passionate about promoting new music from Russia and Eastern Europe, released most of the trio's concert programs.

Laurinavičius and the bassist Leonidas Šinkarenka. Before long, the big band became a sensation in the Soviet Union. It was invited to perform in the capitals of the Soviet republics, at festivals in Riga, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Tallinn and Kyiv. It was a unique band in aesthetic, psychological and pedagogical respects. In other words, it was an orchestra that if necessary, could become a chamber ensemble, a quartet, a sextet or Dixieland (Molokoedov 2001: 223).

The orchestra prepared three large programs, representing a wide range of jazz styles from blues to ragtime and avant-garde: swing, bebop, Dixieland, cool, Latin jazz, including some rock, jazz-rock and even early punk, as well as different folklore elements. In addition to the above-mentioned *Is this possible?*, the most complex composition by Chekasin is Ulijona, a monumental piece developing the theme of a Lithuanian folk ballad. In Ulijona, Chekasin tried to implement his idea of “spatial music”, which was new in jazz at that time (Molokoedov 2001: 223).

The third composition, a concerto for voice and orchestra by Konstantin Petrosian (1985), was recorded at the *Vilnius Recording Studio*. The vocal part was performed by the Armenian singer Tatevik Oganesian. Petrosian’s concerto is a piece of compositional jazz that had no analogues. It masterfully combines early Armenian liturgical chant *sharakan* with the contemporary means of expression of a big band. During the recording, the score was supplemented by the expressive cadence of the Chekasin Quartet and improvisations of the orchestra soloists, therefore, the big band was the soloist’s equal partner¹⁰.

In that period, Chekasin’s projects with the representatives of progressive rock Boris Grebenschikov (*Boris Grebenshikov*), Yury Shevtchuk (*Ūrij Ševčuk*), Piotr Mamonov (*Pëtr Mamónov*) as well as Sergey Kuriokchin (*Sergėj Kurëhin*), one of the most radical Russian musicians, the author of a series of musical/theatrical happenings named *Pop Mekhanika* took place (Moshkow, 2018: 417).

The Chekasin Quartet: Chekasin (reeds), Oleg Molokoedov (piano), Leonidas Šinkarenka (bass), Gediminas Laurinavičius (drums), later – Chekasin, Vytautas Labutis (alto saxophone), Oleg Molokoedov (piano), Arvydas Joffé (drums) performed at almost all major European festivals of new and universal jazz. Despite its distinct stylistic affinities to the *Ganelin Trio*, the music of the quartet was different, first of all in the rendition of the rhythmical group. Besides, Chekasin made a wider use of neo-syncretic and post-modern music trends. The syncretism of the Vilnius jazz school mainly manifested in the fact that some programs had theatrical elements (Molokoedov 2005).

10 In the article *Oh, it was like this: From the memories of a jazz veteran* (L. Šaltenis, *Publika*, No. 3/4, 1992) Liudas Šaltenis wrote that while on holiday in Armenia in the autumn in 1985, he discussed with Petrosian at the Creative House in Dilijan the problem of performing a concerto for voice and orchestra that had not been solved. The work was written for soloist Tatevik Oganesian. The big bands of Helsinki Radio, Lundstrom and Orbelian refused to perform the concerto – the score turned out to be too complicated for them. Šaltenis advised Petrosian to turn to Chekasin. The maestro was greatly offended by the fact that he was offered a group of students, but Šaltenis brought a copy of the score to Vilnius. Chekasin became interested and more than a month later the premiere of the concerto for voice took place at the Kaunas and Vilnius Philharmonic Orchestra.

Petras Vyšniauskas Quartet

In the 1980s, jazz in Lithuania began to be identified with exceptional creativity manifestations characterized by the most radical means of expression of new music. *The Vyšniauskas Quartet*: Petras Vyšniauskas (soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, clarinet, bass clarinet), Vytautas Labutis (reeds), Leonid Šinkarenka (bass), Gediminas Laurinavičius (drums), was among the original bands of the period. It combined jazz stylistics with the tunes and intonations of Lithuanian folk music, imitating its instrumentation while not avoiding its programmatic character (e.g. the compositions *Turėjo bobutė žilą oželį* (*An old lady had a grey goat*), *Saulele motule* (*Mother sun*), and others). In the words of the jazz critic Oleg Molokoedov:

“The *Petras Vyšniauskas quartet* played in an unusual manner. It was new poly-stylistic jazz embracing free jazz and local folklore with a good dose of post-bop energy. The quartet most often performed its programmes as suites, which was stylistically coherent with the Vilnius jazz school.” (Molokoedov 2005)



5. *Petras Vyšniauskas Quartet*. From the left: Vytautas Labutis, Leonid Šinkarenka, Gediminas Laurinavičius, Petras Vyšniauskas, 1983. Photo: Algimantas Kunčius.

While playing with other performers, Vyšniauskas made the maximum use of syncretic elements, poly-stylistics, theatricality, an innovative development of musical thought, an expressive and non-traditional means of producing sound, and his ability to play several instruments at the same time (compositions *Salto mortale*, *The Laptev Sea*, *Capricorn*, *Performance*).

The search for an original artistic language and national identity in the world of Lithuanian art in the 1980s clashed with the everyday life of the officially declared “mature socialism”, which was partly a reflection of stagnation and conformism. Until the years of the Revival Movement at the end of the 1980s, Lithuanian radio, television

and periodicals avoided the topic of jazz music. Traditionally, youth music columns or specialised publications carried news about performers or events in this genre¹¹. Unlike Lithuanian Radio and Television, which hardly broadcast and did not record Lithuanian jazz performers for its stock, the *Vilnius Record Studio*, a division of *Melodiya* in Moscow, had recorded and released up to thirty jazz albums in various formats before 1990 (*Lietuvos populiarioji muzika*, 2013).

The newspaper *Sovetskaya molodezh* (*Sovetskaâ molodež'*, Soviet Youth), published in Latvia from 1981 to 1990, annually carried the ratings of the top Soviet jazz performers in a questionnaire called *Vse zvezdy* (All stars) and deserves special mention. Its initiator, Yuri Kopman, a Latvian journalist and jazz reviewer, developed a ranking model on the example of the authoritative American magazine *DownBeat* (O. Donitch, V. Kopman, *Jazz kvadrat*, 01.01.2000). According to the questionnaire, Lithuanian jazz performers constantly took the lead¹². The results of the survey were published by the agency TASS, Moscow Central Television and the radio station Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which opposed the regime. Undoubtedly, this too was instrumental in disseminating this information abroad. The first decade of the *Birštonas jazz festival* motivated Lithuanian jazz performers. Musicians with an academic background also began to appreciate this genre. Jazz evenings in *Neringa Café* were revived in 1982. In a short time, a new generation of jazz performers was educated at the conservatory in Vilnius, faculties in Klaipėda, and children's music schools.

The second half of the 1980s was marked by a breakthrough of the original style of Lithuanian jazz with numerous concerts at festivals in other countries. One can only regret that at that time it was impossible to record the most spectacular performances of Lithuanian jazz musicians, which took place in the cities of the Soviet Union, and particularly abroad. We have to rely on the memories of contemporaries and the recordings from the stock of the Lithuanian National Radio and the *Vilnius Recording Studio*, which, fortunately, contain the best examples of Lithuanian jazz, almost unknown to wider international audiences due to long-time cultural isolation and a lack of information (Skudienė, 2018: 534). In the late 1980s, a powerful movement of youth musical clubs swept through Lithuania. Jazz lost a part of its social significance. The Singing Revolution advanced more democratic requirements: one had to be together with the others. The first decade following re-established independence on 11 March 1990 was complicated both for jazz musicians and the cultural establishment as a whole.

People had to learn to live and work under conditions of fierce competition, with the laws of the free market being applied to the arts. The world opened up and a new period of Lithuanian jazz that was marked by new possibilities and new modes of expression had arrived.

11 The articles by musicologist Liudas Šaltenis in the weekly *Literatūra ir menas* and magazine *Kultūros barai* are exceptions.

12 The questionnaire was filled out by over 30 leading Soviet jazz critics. The performers were rated in the categories of ensembles and instrumentalists. Ganelin Trio and its members Vladimir Chekasin, Vladimir Tarasov, Petras Vyšniauskas and others were regularly voted among the best.

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