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In the Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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The charity fund that persuaded Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to sing "Blueberry Hill" — and prompted those awkward questions about money — is doing it again this weekend with Moscow concerts where they promise Woody Allen will play jazz.

Billboards went up a few weeks ago, just listing famous people — Allen, Larry King, Dustin Hoffman, Jose Carreras, Francis Ford Coppola and Kevin Costner among them — and saying the concerts would be "broadcast" in Gorky Park on Saturday and Sunday. It said it was to support the fight with children's cancer and eye diseases.

The Federation fund invited Putin to its concert in December, which initially seemed an amazing coup with big Hollywood names such as Sharon Stone and Mickey Rourke. And Putin sang and bashed out a tune on the piano — "Where does the motherland begin?" — the same as he sang with spy ring member Anna Chapman. Could it get any more perfect?

But then a mother of a girl visited by Stone through the fund complained that she had received nothing more concrete. A spokeswoman for the fund was quoted as saying it did not raise money directly but encouraged wealthy guests to donate to hospitals — which was not what

an earlier press release said.

The fund's head, Vladimir Kiselyov, former drummer of the mildly famous 1980s band Zemlyane, held an irascible news conference to deny that anything fishy was going on. At one point, he asked a bothersome Kommersant journalist to "step outside."

Kommersant reported that Kiselyov told the same reporter this week: "You hear me, Chernykh, this is the last time that you call me."

Kiselyov is rumored to be a friend of Putin's, which might explain the fund's meteoric rise. He used to head a federal enterprise that runs tourist and entertainment events in the Kremlin and on Red Square, Kommersant reported.

In the end the fund announced donations of costly equipment to hospitals. But it was a PR disaster, and the latest event has prompted a lot of speculation and media investigation.

The fund's web site does not say a word about the concert, but it lists some donations. French actor Gerard Depardieu gave equipment worth about 2 million rubles ($71,450), and Moscow and St. Petersburg hospitals received equipment and children's playrooms.

The city government gave the event free use of 60 video screens and up to 200 billboards, Moskovskiye Novosti reported, citing an official. Which is nice, although the benefit is unclear for advertising an event that isn't open to the public.

A Moskovskiye Novosti reporter phoned the fund claiming to be the assistant of a wealthy businessman and asked how much he would have to donate to get an invite. A touch unethical, but informative, as the newspaper obtained the figure of $100,000.

It also called Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, who said the prime minister was not planning to go to the concerts.

It called 20 hospitals listed on the site as accepting donations and found that nine did not know of the fund. Two said they had received costly equipment. Four said they had received children's gifts, and one said it had received a large donation but did not know its origins. The remaining four did not pick up.

Kommersant called three hospitals, one of which said it had no dealings with the fund, another said it had organized a concert, and the other said Steven Seagal had visited.

There is also a mystery surrounding a denim-jacketed woman who appears on billboards, named as the fund's "patroness," Yelena Sever, and is photographed on the web site sitting next to Putin.

Moskovskiye Novosti cited Kiselyov's former band mate as saying she is Kiselyov's wife, but Sever is not her real name.

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