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Q&A: Igor Butman's Tune Mixes Loyalty and Service

By Alexander Bratersky

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Butman has a passion for worthy causes and for playing the saxophone. **Vladimir Filonov**

If Hillary Rodham Clinton is ever elected president of the United States, there is a chance she'll invite Russian jazz legend Igor Butman to play at her inauguration party. Bill Clinton, who is well-acquainted with Butman, called him his favorite living saxophone player.

One of the leading Soviet-era saxophonists, Butman, 51, left his homeland for the United States in 1987 and expanded his musical knowledge by studying at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Igor Butman

Education

Graduated from Mussorgsky music school in Leningrad

Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Work experience

1983–1984 — Oleg Lundstrem big-band orchestra, Moscow, alto saxophonist
1984–1987 — Allegro jazz band, tenor saxophonist
1987–1996 — Lived in the U.S., played in several American jazz bands, including The Lionel Hampton Orchestra and Grover Washington
1999–present — Head of Igor Butman Jazz Orchestra; head of Butman Music label.

Favorite book: "The Count of Monte Cristo" (1844) by Alexandre Dumas.
Movie pick: "Once Upon a Time in America" (1984), directed by Sergio Leone; "The Elusive Adventures" (1968), a Soviet adventure film directed by Edmond Keosayan.
Favorite Moscow restaurant: Igor Butman Club, 1 Ulitsa Lizy Chaikinoi and 16 Ulansky Pereulok.
Weekend getaway destination: Sardinia, Italy.

Though Butman returned to Russia in 1996, his American fame is still with him. The Wall Street Journal said he is "one of the best traditional American-style big-band leaders, although he happens to be Russian."

Among Butman's many achievements is a joint concert with prominent jazz musician and longtime friend Wynton Marsalis, winner of nine Grammy awards, at Lincoln Center in New York in 2003. Marsalis called Butman a "phenomenal musician."

Butman believes he can use his fame for the broader cause of raising the profile of Russian jazz.

"We have great interest in jazz in our country," Butman said. "When we were in the U.S., I saw that the audiences were older, but ours are made up of younger people."

He recently returned from New York, where he took part in the annual Association of Performing Arts Presenters Conference, and is now busy preparing for his own event, the annual Triumph of Jazz festival, which will take place Feb. 22-25 in Moscow and St.

Petersburg.

But while Butman's talent is widely praised, some members of the intelligentsia have criticized him for being a senior member of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and throwing his support behind President Vladimir Putin.

Butman doesn't hide his virulently anti-Communist views and support for conservative values, which are key reasons for his backing of the current Russian president.

"I trust this man, and I don't see any other candidates among those offered," he told The Moscow Times before the presidential elections in March.

Butman joined United Russia in 2008, during Dmitry Medvedev's tenure as president.

But his primary extracurricular activity centers on supporting young people's causes. He has regularly participated in fundraising events for Russian orphans and youth causes. A prime example is his Jazz for Children charity concerts, organized under the auspices of UNICEF.

He is also an active member of the We Are Together Foundation, which has funded several kidney dialysis centers in the regions.

Although Butman tends to follow the party line, his celebrity status allows him to speak freely.

In an interview with The Moscow Times at the Winzavod Modern Art Center during the filming of a television series in which Butman has a cameo, he spoke in support of self-exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky, a bitter enemy of Putin's.

In 2000, the Berezovsky-run Triumph Foundation helped Butman organize the first Triumph of Jazz Festival.

"I live in a free country, and although a member of the United Russia party, I must not forget the people who helped us," Butman said about Berezovsky.

An avid hockey player in his spare time, Butman was introduced to the Berezovsky by Igor Shabdurasulov, the head of the foundation, a former senior administration official and his hockey partner.

"They gave us $15,000, and I thought it was a huge amount," Butman said. "We did everything professionally at a very high level. We had an amazing concert, and so it has become a tradition."

Along with his music career, Butman is also a successful entrepreneur, running two Igor Butman clubs in Moscow. They are known for their jazz performances and European cuisine.

This interview has been edited for a length and clarity.

Q: How would you summarize your reasons for leaving Russia and the experience you had in the U.S.?

A: I lived in America for five years. There were difficult moments there and interesting

moments and moments of good luck. I made mistakes, too. I also had a lot of people around me who led me astray.

When I left the Soviet Union, I was the best tenor saxophonist in the country. I had my own band, but I was a musician who had hit a glass ceiling, and I realized that I needed to leave. During that time, there was no freedom of speech. It was a bureaucratic era, and I saw that I could conquer five-sixths of a country rather than one-sixth of one that had been conquered already, so I decided to go to America.

When I came to the U.S., I found out that there were a lot of myths about the country as far as jazz is concerned. "He plays like an American"; that was always the greatest compliment. But I have seen Americans play great jazz, and I have seen Americans play really badly. But if someone needs to go for the experience to understand American life and especially the New York experience, it can be very important for any musician.

Q: Do you think cultural projects can help the U.S. and Russia understand each other better?

A: The only thing that can bring us closer together is popular culture. Everyone knows that we have Tchaikovsky, and the whole world knows about him, but he is already in the public domain. At the latest jazz convention in New York, when we came as the Butman band, we were supported by an American who does business in Russia and likes our music. We were very grateful to him, and he saw to it that after the convention we received invitations to play 40 concerts a year.

It was unprecedented for a jazz band from the former Soviet Union. We have a project called Butman Plays Goodman, where we play Benny Goodman songs, and after the first song from Butman Plays Goodman the audience rose and gave us a standing ovation.

Q: Do you see a danger in state support for culture since it allows the state to dictate conditions for artists?

A: If they give money, let them dictate. But they can't make a circus out of a jazz band. They give money for the jazz band of Igor Butman, and if they want to check out how the money is being spent, we can play for them.

From one perspective, the government gives grants to our famous orchestras so that their musicians can grow locally and not have to leave for the U.S. I believe that is absolutely proper, but it shouldn't be just state support. We also need to encourage private donations.

Soon we will have a law on patronage, which would provide benefits for philanthropy. Along with this, it is necessary to change society's attitude toward rich people, who are often labeled crooks by the public.

Q: What kind of advice would you would give to American entrepreneurs who come to Russia to do business here?

A: When many Russian immigrants come to America, they immediately begin to blame the country when they don't like something, complaining that they can't find their favorite tomatoes or something else. They also say Americans are stupid and create all kinds of stereotypes. So when I talk to some of these people, I tell them to start learning

the language, watch movies, read books about this country to learn about American independence and what America has achieved over the years.

At the same time, I would advise Americans to learn about Russian culture. Many Americans who come to do business have Russian roots, but they need to get deep into its cultural life. Everyone knows about the Bolshoi Theater, but there are other theaters, rock clubs, even our club. I advise them to get to know the real Russia and not just the one that can be read about in the newspapers.

Q: The ban on adoption of Russian children by Americans has strongly divided the nation. How do you feel about this legislation?

A: I am sure that the president and Duma deputies are not stupid and considered everything before the law was passed. While we didn't know all the details, we immediately accused the Duma and were outraged. But the law was passed by the Duma, which was elected by the people — although some question it.

Everyone is saying how bad Putin and the Duma are, but maybe people who attended the march against this law should go and collect money for children, organize a charity concert or even adopt a child.

We have people driving luxury cars, tourism is booming, but can't we take care of our own children? So let Americans take care of them? Yes, they do it, but they also receive benefits from the state or charity organizationsfor doing this.

Q: Today, the Russian intelligentsia is split. How do you regard those who today oppose the government?

A: How could I say that Vladimir Vladimirovich Pozner is a bad person? But I don't like the fact that he allows himself to put down the parliament on television. (Editor's note: Pozner called the State Duma a "stupid woman" after the parliament passed a legislation to ban U.S. adoptions. He later apologized and called it a slip of the tongue.) Can he insult the state and work on state television? Of course he can present his own opinion, but I think insults are destructive. Destructive criticism in society more than 100 years ago allowed the Bolsheviks to come to power.

At present, we have two directions we could go in: better or worse. Can we achieve the best with Putin? I am absolutely sure of it. He makes mistakes, and we can point them out, but we ourselves have to follow the law. When we drive into the oncoming lane, we are violating the law and getting in the way of allowing Putin to do what he's promised. There is more democracy in America, but there is more order, too.

Q: You never regretted that you became a member of the United Russia party, which is now a target of major criticism.

A: I am an adult, and I thought about everything. This is not a party of enemies. Some people joined the Communist Party to destroy it from within. United Russia is the ruling party, but it should have people like me among its ranks.

I have a project called Culture and Time, to find young and inspiring Russian musicians,

and United Russia supported this project in Rostov-on-Don and Irkutsk. However, some of my critics say I am "sucking money" out of United Russia, which is not nice to hear.

Q: What inspires you?

A: I am inspired by my critics. I always pay attention to criticism and try to understand where I didn't do my best.

A person should not think that he is a genius. A great number of people write on Facebook that I am a bad musician and say that in the U.S. I would be unemployed and would play in a subway station. Why did they not come to our site to read reviews of our shows in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal? Let them talk to the musician from the subway and ask him if he has reviews in those papers.

Q: What personal qualities turn you off?

A: I don't like inactive people who justify their laziness by their difficult situation or the injustice of the authorities, complaining about life instead of creating something.

I recently talked with one young musician from Kazan. I told him that he is a talented man and that I could make a recommendation that he become the head of the State Orchestra of Tatarstan. He could invite musicians, get financing and travel the whole world. He said he wants to go to America. I told him that in America no one needs him. He can come to the United States as a leader of the Tatar jazz orchestra to share experiences, learn or teach. But going there as an unknown musician, he would find himself running around in circles and playing in restaurants.

You wind up living in Brooklyn, having a family to feed, running between jobs to make ends meet. Musicians I have played with in the U.S. have only started to make names for themselves, and they were much younger than me.

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