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Jam Sessions at Cafe Esse Inspire Young Minds

By Jordan Bryan

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Numerous young musicians share the stage and perform together for the first time at the weekly jam session. **Jordan Bryan**

It is no secret that Moscow has a thriving jazz scene: look at a calendar of concerts for the week and you will find that at least a quarter of them are jazz, considerably more than in American cities that are considered to be the birthplace of jazz. While much of the jazz scene is dominated by a small number of big venues and famous musicians, there are some places where even beginners can find an audience.

Go to Jazz Cafe Esse at 9 p.m. on Tuesdays and you will see a typical mid-week restaurant scene: couples young and old sharing entrees and quiet conversation, smoke filtering through the doors of the smoking section into the main dining room, businessmen hunched over tables, laughing in the dim light.

Look a little closer, though, and you will notice a stage adorned with vacant instruments

at the far end of the room. In a few moments, pianist Yakov Okun, fashionably attired and fashionably late, will take the stage, give a quick nod to his band members, and everything will change.

Conversations around the room peter out mid-sentence as heads incline toward the sound coming from the bandstand. Eager men and women with instrument cases strapped to their backs slowly file in and shake hands in the corner. By 10 p.m., it is evident that this is no ordinary performance: this is a jam session.

For those unfamiliar with the concept, a jam session is an improvised performance given by jazz musicians who have never rehearsed with one another, or possibly even met one another. One can get the feel for it simply by observing Okun and his group, who follow jazz protocol down to the very last note.

Last Tuesday, after playing a rather long set of music up front — Okun is a prolific piano player and soloist — he took the microphone in his hand, shielded his eyes from the stage lights, and peered into the flock of musicians, hand-picking two or three at a time to join him on stage.

Turning to Okun, a young saxophonist named Victor Potemkin suggested that the group play a song called "Recordame," a standard tune written by jazz legend Joe Henderson. After a brief discussion on stage, which involved a lot of head shaking and mutters of disapproval, the band instead began to play "Bye Bye Blackbird."

Later on in the evening, Potemkin admitted that his choice had been somewhat taboo. "Yakov told me, 'That is for children,'" he laughed. Despite the slight rebuke, Potemkin, who is currently a first-year baccalaureate student at Gnessin State Musical College, was enthusiastic about the musicians on stage.

He said that this was his first time at Cafe Esse, but many of his friends from the academy go nearly every week. "Many of these guys give individual performances in other places around the city, but here you get to listen to all of the great players at once. That is actually my former teacher, over there," he said, and pointed to a saxophonist who was playing a burning solo over "Someday My Prince Will Come," another jazz staple. In general, there seemed to be a lot of goodwill among the musicians, highlighting the fact that jazz in Moscow is not only an art form, but also a type of community.

Although it is not difficult to find live jazz in Moscow, finding a place where on can listen to great jazz, let alone get a chance to play it, is more of a challenge. Tuesdays at Jazz Cafe Esse are very unique in this respect, showcasing some of the top talent in Moscow in a casual, cover-free environment. Perhaps even more importantly, these jam sessions give young musicians a chance to cut their teeth with some of the old guard of the Moscow jazz scene.

The jam session was the original mechanism by which jazz evolved in America from the Big Band Era to Be-Bop, from straight-ahead to the modal jazz of the sixties. If you are a jazz fan, musician, or even a newcomer, be sure not to miss out on a chance to participate in the spontaneous creation of a genre of music constantly in transition.

Jam sessions with Yakov Okun run every Tuesday at 9 p.m. from Oct. 22. See jazzesse.ru

for more information and a full schedule.

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