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A Sax Player Reflects on Jazz in U.S. and Russia

By Darya Bielecka

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Nick Vintskevich tries to split tours evenly between Russia and the U.S. **Sergey Sevastianov**

Analytical skills are not a strong point for many musicians. For most of them, especially the Russian jazz stars, it is still easier to play their instruments than talk and explain.

Nonetheless, in a few hours of a tough conversation, Russian saxophone player and composer Nick Vintskevich explained to The Moscow Times why the American entertainment business is so attractive to creative people from all over the world, and why he feels that playing both overseas and domestically is better than emigrating to the motherland of jazz for good.

Nick Vintskevich's composition "Vive L'amour" has impressed not only the Russian jazz critics but also some American smooth jazz radio station, who describe it as simple, elegant jazz motif, influenced by George Benson and Grover Washington. "Viva L'amour" was played on Colorado's Aspen Beat Public Radio and Smooth Jazz Global Radio for about two months, and Vintskevich is a frequent starring guest of the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival and many

other jazz radio shows.

Recently, Vintskevich has been splitting his tours almost equally between Russia and the U.S., but he says he would never change his citizenship or his permanent residence."I don't want to be just a local jazz star and concentrate only on one specific region," Nick said.

Sometimes, American jazz singers are paid several times more than local performers in smaller, provincial Russian towns. Vice versa, Nick typically receives more money for his performances abroad. "I'm attracted by the chance to perform with better rhythm sections in the U.S. Russian and European drummers and bass players are softer in sound and weaker in rhythm," Nick said.

One thing Nick Vintskevich envies in the U.S. is the system of music education and reliance on grants and sponsorships. On the other hand, he feels that Russian parents are more ambitious about the success of their kids. If a teenager shows good results in soccer, then of course he must be a world-known soccer player, no less.

"I never felt any pressure from my father, Leonid Vintskevich, [a famous jazz pianist,]" says Nick. "But some of my colleagues really did. They said that for them later on it was a serious psychological trauma. In America, parents don't have any excessive expectations about the talents of their kids. They learn and play music at family brunches just for pleasure and fun."

Vintskevich says Russian businessmen are focused on increasing personal wealth, while overseas there are many families and individuals sponsoring music halls, theaters and even individual musicians or actors. There are government-supported grants and educational programs, to which anyone can apply through clear and transparent systems.

Infrastructure for rehearsals and training for musicians in the U.S. is absolutely fantastic, Vintskevich said. In any music institution, there are lots of free classes with all kinds of instruments available through a simple system of registration. One can easily play what one wants and whenever one wants. In Russia, first you must find a decent room for rehearsing and make sure not to disturb your neighbors, as most Russian families live in multi-story apartment buildings, not single family dwellings.

Coming to the U.S. for the first time is easier as a player in a well-established orchestra, like Oleg Lundstrem's or Igor Butman's. The next step is to play your solo well and not to forget to collect business cards afterwards.

"In Russia you definitely need to be somebody in addition to just a good jazz player for public fame," Vintskevich said. Saxophone player Igor Butman is a politician, hockey player and celebrity, and a frequent guest of various television and radio programs. Trumpeter Vadim Eilenkrig, commonly ranked second in the hierarchy of Russian jazz, is a semiprofessional weightlifter and television host with a well-known sense of humor.

Asked about the importance of personal connections over professional skills, Nick Vintskevich hesitated, but could not deny the value of connections. Just the same as all over the world, the doors of radio stations and television channels are often opened either with the help of money or strong personal connections, Vintskevich said.

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