

Lithuanian Jazz in Retrospect 1920s–1980s

ABSTRACT

This article is a retrospective of the development of jazz in Lithuania from early local jazzy bands in 1920s to Lithuanian jazz masters in the 1980s.

The article discusses how till the wave of the “thaw” in the 1960s and immediately after, jazz was considered a phenomenon unacceptable to Soviet ideology and totally alien to Lithuanian culture and how the Iron Curtain and 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, it took root in the realm of Soviet culture. Musicians with academic training began to play jazz, 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 the Jazz festivals in Lithuania and dedicated to the great Lithuanian free jazz musicians, the bands, performers, composers and their works of that period continue to bring fame to Lithuanian jazz worldwide.

KEYWORDS: Lithuanian jazz, Lithuanian Orchestra of Popular Music, Juozas Tiškus, Vilnius Jazz Club, Tallinn Jazz Festival, Elektrėnai Jazz Festival Jaunystė, Birštonas Jazz Festival, The Ganelin Trio, Vladimir Chekasin Big Band, The Chekasin Quartet, Oleg Molokoyedov, Petras Vyšniauskas Quartet, Melodiya, Vilnius Recording Studio.

Introduction

The 20th century jazz history has already been written. The evolution of this genre that lasted more than a century ran parallel with one of the most singular technological achievements – sound recording, its reproduction and the advance of music recording industry; however, the influence, perception and spread of this music differed from country to country.

When the progress of the first decades of the 20th century was accelerating, Lithuania was part of tsarist Russia and Germany. In 1918 Lithuania proclaimed independence. It was not until the mid-thirties, after the slow and difficult building of the new state, that Lithuania reached economic consolidation: the burgeoning of industry and commerce, many new modernistic buildings of different purpose went up, and the city centre changed beyond recognition. Kaunas became a small, European, in the words of contemporaries, even slightly “Americanized” city. A demand for a new civilisation and new quality of culture implied new forms of communication and entertainment – spacious elegant centrally located restaurants and cafes replaced dark, littered inns; in 1926 Kaunas radiophone began regular broadcasts. According to period press, the restaurants and cafes were all crammed during musical sessions, where



Example 1.
Hofmeklerband
led by Moishe
Hofmekler, 1930s

one could hear the most popular European and American hits, and tunes from various musicals. Local jazz bands (led by *Moišė Hofmekleris* and *Danielius Pomerancas*) tried to match the best examples of swing orchestras from abroad, and the public learned the latest dances – the tango, fox trot, Charleston. A great deal of Lithuanian popular music was recorded and released by companies like Odeon, Columbia, His Master's Voice, etc., during the inter-war period.

The unpredictable expansion of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s erased the image of independent inter-war Lithuania from the memory of Lithuanians, and Lithuania was eliminated from the map of Europe for a long time. After the war, performers of light music not scattered by political changes gathered in Kaunas – improvisations of classical jazz themes could occasionally be heard in cafes, restaurants and film theatres. The city's music scene became livelier.

In 1955 a students' big band was formed in Kaunas Polytechnic Institute, led by the arranger and composer *Juozas Tiškus* (1929–2006). In 1958 by the decree of the Minister of Culture the band was re-established as the Lithuanian Orchestra of Popular Music of the State Philharmonic Society. In the course of time the LOPM became one of the best orchestras in the former Soviet Union and was compared with *Oleg Lundstrem's* big band. Jazz virtuosos from Moscow, Leningrad, the Ukraine and Latvia, as well as the best Lithuanian instrumentalists played in this orchestra. During one concert it performed as many as 12–14 complicated orchestral jazz scores – compositions by *Dizzy Gillespie*, *Count Basie*, *Quincy Jones* and *Benny Golson*. Another part of the programme was usually devoted to popular music, light music by Lithuanian and foreign composers.

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ture. In 1958 the newspaper *Komjaunimo tiesa* [*Komsomol Truth*] published an article “What is Jazz?” In this article jazz was compared with “a piece of dirt contaminating the purest water...” (Yla 1958) As Juozas Tiškus recalls, “we felt constant pressure”. Bitter commissioned articles battering the orchestra’s playing used to appear in the press, zealous political supervisors of culture set out the rules stating how many percent of which music the orchestra was supposed to play. Names of many foreign composers were not allowed to appear in concert programmes, therefore names of composers and titles used to be changed or invented (Listavičiūtė 2002).

In the early 1960s, the cosy Neringa Cafe in the very centre of Vilnius was frequented by the Lithuanian cultural elite: architects, poets, artists, writers, composers and musicians. Each night jazz was played in a liberal intellectual atmosphere particularly disliked by the KGB; it is not surprising that jazz evenings soon ended.

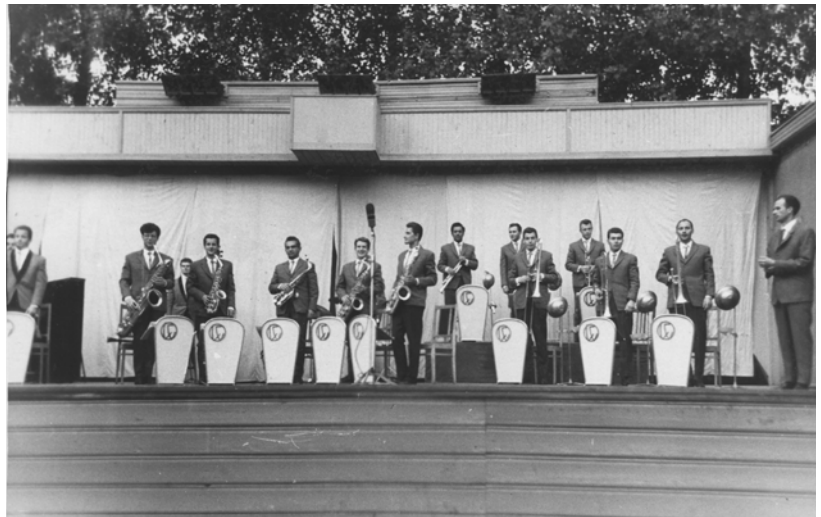
The creative activity of the LOPM encouraged the formation of other bands: the big band of the Šiauliai construction trust, the Kaunas Oktava Big Band, the Nemuno žiburiai [The Nemunas Lights] Orchestra, Klaipėda Žėrutis Band and others.

1958 saw the founding of another professional band – the Popular Music Orchestra of the Lithuanian Radio (led by Jonas Vadauskas). It began to record music of different genres by Lithuanian and foreign composers; work in the radio studio provided a basic creative laboratory for many Lithuanian composers and musicians. In 1960 the Light Music Department was founded in the Composers’ Union.

Jazz music was a source of ideas and inspiration to the Lithuanian composers Benjaminas Gorbulskis, Eduardas Balsys, Antanas Rekašius, Teisutis Makačinas, Mikas Vaitkevičius, Feliksas Bajoras, Osvaldas Balakauskas, Rimvydas Racevičius and Viačeslavas Ganelinas (Šaltenis 1983).

In December 1961, a memorable event in the history of Lithuanian jazz was held in the State Conservatoire in Vilnius (presently the Lithuanian Academy of Music) –

Example 2. The Lithuanian Orchestra of Popular Music led by Juozas Tiškus, 1963





Example 3. Vilnius jazz club, 1963

a concert of three bands: Gediminas Narijauskas' Dixieland, a quintet led by Liudas Šaltenis and Eugenijus Puidokas, and Viacheslav Ganelin's Remigijus Pilypaitis modern jazz quartet. The concert ended a three-day cycle of lectures of the Scholarly Society of Conservatoire Students devoted to jazz.

During the period of political thaw, there was quite an intensive life at the so-called youth café-reading rooms, which became semi-legal jazz clubs. The Vilnius jazz club opened its doors to jazz lovers on March 13, 1963.

In fact, a couple of years prior to that a youth cafe-reading club with a small stage (now Vilnius Street 22) was opened. Later young people also began to gather in the Kaunas Vakarų Cafe (former Versalis Restaurant). The club was a venue for reading lectures, listening to recordings, performing, discussions, meetings and jam sessions with rare guest musicians from abroad. Similar youth cafes existed in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities of Russia, and their activity was strictly supervised by Soviet functionaries of the "thaw" period.

Jazz Festivals

The first jazz festival in the Soviet period took place in 1949 in Tallinn (Estonia). By the way, the Tallinn festival is one of the oldest events of this kind in the world (the famous Newport festival was launched in 1954). The Tallinn festival won international recognition for Lithuanian musicians – three consecutive times Ganelin's trio became the winner in 1965, 1966 and 1967. In 1966 Algirdas Vizgirda was acclaimed the best flutist of the festival. In 1967 Oleg Molokoyedov was awarded a diploma for the best folk song arrangement. The respectable jazz commentator of *The Voice of America* Will Conover did a radio programme on Ganelin. The festival reached its peak in 1967. In the overcrowded hall of the Kalev Sports Palace, besides other outstanding foreign musicians,

the famous American Charles Lloyd's quartet appeared. Unfortunately, manifestations of free spirit associated with jazz were too evident for that time, and soon the Tallinn festival was banned (Molokoyedov 2001).

A first jazz festival Jaunystė-68 in Lithuania held one year later in the newly built city of Elektrėnai, was not bound to become traditional as well. Participants of the first and only Elektrėnai festival were numerous Lithuanian performers, bands from Riga and Moscow. A concert of the winners of the festival was held in the Vilnius Philharmonic Society, and a record was released.

With the founding of a jazz section at the Art Workers' Palace in 1977 (its activity was coordinated by the jazz enthusiast musicologist Liudas Šaltenis), talks about reviving the Elektrėnai Jazz Festival in one of the cities were in the air. However, the history of the first festival took a different course.

In 1980 a venue devoted exclusively to jazz, the Culture House of Birštonas, a resort town in Central Lithuania, finally appeared. The first Birštonas jazz festival took place on November 1 and 2, 1980, with the participation of Lithuanian bands and the Estonian composer and pianist Tonu Naissoo.

The festival was dedicated to the 16th congress of the Communist Party and World Youth Day, though nobody really cared about these obligatory issues. The most important fact was that finally Lithuania could boast a venue where jazz was played freely (Šaltenis 1988).

Thanks to the wise strategy of the organizers musicologist Liudas Šaltenis and Zigmantas Vileikis, the outstanding jazz musicians and critics of that period from Leningrad, Moscow, Riga and Yerevan such as Vladimir Feyertag, Alexey Batashev, Konstantin Orbelian and Yury Saulsky visited Birštonas and participated in the work of the jury. The authority of all these personalities protected the festival, and it gradually developed into an important international event. Taking an interest in jazz at that time especially playing it testified to an inner freedom and non-compliance with Soviet ideology.

In the 1980s Lithuanian radio and the Vilnius Recording Studio recorded unique moments of the Birštonas jazz festival: the concert recordings mentioned above testified to the rise of a new freer generation of jazz musicians. Records of the winners of 1982, 1986 and 1988 were released.

In the autumn of 1988 other festivals appeared on the Lithuanian musical scene: the Sing Group Jazz Festival in Panevėžys and the Jazz Forum in Vilnius (since 1989, Vilnius Jazz). At the present time Vilnius jazz is one of the major international festivals of new European jazz and one of the oldest traditional events of Lithuanian jazz held annually in Vilnius also called 'a threshold between the East and the West'.

In 1990 the Kaunas Jazz Festival was launched.



Example 4. Ganelin Trio: Vyacheslav Ganelin, Vladimir Tarasov and Vladimir Chekasin, 1971–1972

Performers

The Ganelin Trio (Vyacheslav Ganelin, Vladimir Tarasov and Vladimir Chekasin) was the only recognized jazz ensemble in Vilnius in the seventies. Ganelin spent ten years looking for equal partners, and only this 'golden' trio was included into European and American Jazz Encyclopedias.

In 1974 the Ganelin Trio was one of the first ensembles in the former Soviet Union to be granted the status of the contemporary chamber music ensemble of the Lithuanian State Philharmonic, which made it easier for the Trio to get permission to participate in festivals in the Soviet Union and abroad.

The blend of musical styles and cultures, new forms, an inclination towards plastic art, collaborative authorship, multi-instrumentalism, disclaiming the dichotomy of the soloist and accompanist – all these characteristics make the Trio akin 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. In a conversation with an authoritative jazz critic Aleksey Batashev, Ganelin said:

"... we listen to all kinds of music. Even the simplest polka tune could lend a needed rhythmical pattern or sonority. We cannot do without classical music, traditional jazz ... in addition we should not forget modern jazz, as well as other up-to-date issues of the music world. The model of the classical theatre is of great interest to us. Sometimes our artistic creations could be called 'psychological instrumental theatre.'" (Vyacheslav Ganelin talks to Alexey Batashev 1973: 42)

The Lithuanian musicians (one of a few Soviet jazz ensembles) performed in Eastern and Western Europe, Cuba, India, and the USA; their records were released

Example 5. Big Band of the Lithuanian State Conservatoire led by Vladimir Chekasin, 1986



in Poland, Germany, Switzerland, the USA and Great Britain and distributed around the world.

The Trio's first programme *Con anima*, specially designed for recording, was recorded in Vilnius Record Studio in 1976, and released in 1977. The Trio's programme *Poco a poco*, performed in the Jazz Jamboree festival in Poland in 1976, received the highest acclaim from critics and listeners alike. Joachim Berendt, the renowned German jazz expert, claimed that the Trio plays:

"... the most organised and the most professional free jazz, I have had chance to hear." (*Down Beat* 1980)

The musicians of the GTC as well as their colleagues who formed bands later were trained in the orthodox, academic spirit and nurtured by the aesthetic traditions of European musical culture. They formed the so-called Vilnius jazz school, whose founders undoubtedly were the GTC.

It was in the early 1980s departments of pop music were established at Lithuanian State Conservatoire (now the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre) in Vilnius and Klaipėda, the Juozas Tallat-Kelpša Higher School of Music (now the Vilnius Conservatoire) and the Balys Dvarionas Children's School of Music where the basics of jazz were taught.

All members of the GTC were invited to teach at the Dvarionas School. They not only taught jazz vernacular, but also nurtured the innovatory spirit of the Vilnius jazz school.

In the early 1980s 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



Example 6. Petras Vyšniauskas, Leonid Šinkarenko & Dominykas Vyšniauskas, 1988

member of the GTC. While working with students, he developed an effective method of teaching the technique of jazz and orchestral playing. Chekasin found an intriguing way of blending traditional and contemporary jazz into a uniform colourful texture. The artistic result of this solution apparently gave rise to many future programmes of Chekasin, which can be called “non-standard standards”.

Chekasin’s artistic pursuits were manifested in a lively programme-collage with a witty title *Is This Possible?* as well as (another programme) the concerto for voice and orchestra by Konstantin Petrosian (1985) was recorded and released by the Soviet label Melodia with incredible speed for that time. Chekasin’s band sensationally occupied the top places of Soviet jazz questionnaires, leaving behind the orchestras of Oleg Lundstrem and Konstantin Orbelian. In 1986 Chekasin and his big band won the Grand Prix of the Birštonas Festival.

In the late 1980s (Chekasin and his big band) actively joined the mass events of the national revival movement: he gave concerts with the cult band Antis and made recordings.

In the 1980s Lithuanian jazz was represented by three bands: the GTC, and the quartets of Vladimir Chekasin and Petras Vyšniauskas, the only bands that were recognised by the State Philharmonic Society, which meant that they were entitled to go on concert tours in foreign countries without much difficulty. The Chekasin Quartet, which was the second after the GTC to give concerts in the West, performed at almost all major European festivals of new and universal jazz.

Soon came the era of the saxophonists Petras Vyšniauskas and Vytautas Labutis and their bands, the percussionist Tarasov, who also developed international projects, as well as Saulius Šiaučiulis’, Gintautas Abarius’, Skirmantas Sasnauskas’, and Kęstutis Lušas’ bands, in addition to the star of Lithuanian vocal jazz Marina Granovskaja and many others.

The multi-instrumentalist Petras Vyšniauskas (b. 1957) and his Quartet (Vytautas Labutis, Leonid Šinkarenko, Gediminas Laurinavičius) was among the best bands of the period.

In the words of the jazz critic Oleg Molokoyedov, “it was new poly-stylistic jazz embracing free jazz and local folklore with a good dose of post-bop energy” (Molokoyedov 2001).

While playing with other performers, Vyšniauskas made maximum use of syncretic elements, poly-stylistics, theatricality, innovatory development of the musical thought, expressive and non-traditional means of producing sound, and his ability of playing on several instruments at a time (for example, *Saltomortale*, *The Laptev Sea*, *Capricorn*, *Performance* and others).

The first album of the Vyšniauskas Quartet *Searches and Discoveries* was recorded in the Vilnius Recording Studio and highly acclaimed by Howard Mandel in the authoritative *Down Beat* magazine in 1988.

Conclusion

“A phenomenon of delayed culture...” – this conception is used by art critics for the analysis of trends and tendencies of visual art in Lithuania. Can a similar methodology be applied in the discussion of the development of Lithuanian jazz? 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, it took root in the realm of the culture of Lithuania. Musicians with academic training began to play jazz, and it came to be identified with a manifestation of extraordinary creativity, entitled to employ even the most radical means of musical expression.

The early 1970s (not only in Lithuania) were particularly unfavourable to the development of jazz music. In the United States and Europe rock began to rule young people’s interest and hearts; the beat of this new rhythm reached Lithuania as well.

In 1972 Romas Kalanta immolated himself in Kaunas. Everything causing a possible threat to Soviet ideology was restrained and persecuted. Jazz musicians found shelter in the restaurants and bars of Vilnius and other cities, and the best performers and bands joined into association of the city’s pop orchestras and bands. Pop conquered concert venues, and theatrical entertainment programmes prevailed in restaurants and bars.

The direction of the *Melodiya* recording company was curtailing the activities of the republican recording studios; in order to be put into circulation the programmes had to undergo tough screenings and censorship. The first jazz LP in Lithuania was released as late as 1977 (the Ganelin Trio *Con anima*).

Already from 1984, Lithuanian radio had stopped broadcasting foreign pop and jazz music.

In the late 1980s a powerful movement of youth musical clubs swept through Lithuania. Jazz lost part of its social significance “The Singing Revolution” advanced more democratic requirements: one had to be together with the others.

Jazz came to Lithuania with great delay, underwent a surprisingly rapid evolution, “burst out” with the compositions of Ganelin’s trio that had a particularly radical sound in the jazz world, nurtured a new generation of Lithuanian jazz figures of the end of the 20th century and formed a professional attitude to this genre.

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 stocks of the Lithuanian National Radio and the Vilnius Recording Studio, which, fortunately, contain the best examples of Lithuanian jazz, almost unknown to a wider international audience due to long-time cultural isolation and lack of information.

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