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# The Status of Jazz in the Soviet Union and the Beginning of the Anti-Jazz Rhetoric in the 1920s

*Džiazo situacija Sovietų Sąjungoje. Antidžiazo retorikos pradžia XX a. trečiajame dešimtmetyje*

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## Abstract

This article explores the ambiguities around the status of Soviet jazz. Based on the thoughts of Russian jazz historians, the author's own experience, and a historiographical overview, it first examines the variety of ways jazz has been discussed in popular and academic discourse. The second part of the article provides insights into the socio-cultural and political conditions surrounding the appearance of jazz and demonstrates how following its positive reception, anti-jazz attacks emerged at the end of the 1920s, initiated by the pronouncements of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians. Finally, Maxim Gorky's article "The Music of the Gross" from 1928, often considered a symbolic beginning of the anti-jazz rhetoric around jazz, is examined.

**Keywords:** Soviet Union, status of jazz, ambiguities, 1920s.

## Anotacija

Straipsnis skirtas dviprasmiškos sovietinio džiazo situacijos analizei. Remiantis Rusijos džiazo istorikų mintimis, autorės patirtimi ir istoriografinė apžvalga, pirmiausia nagrinėjama džiazo aptarimo būdų populiarajame ir akademiname diskurse įvairovė. Antroje straipsnio dalyje kalbama apie sociokultūrinės ir politinės džiazo atsiradimo sąlygas ir parodoma, kaip po pradinės teigiamos jo receptijos XX a. trečiojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje kilo antidžiazo išpuolių, inicijuotų Rusijos proletarinių muzikų asociacijos. Galiausiai apžvelgiamas Maksimo Gorkio 1928 m. straipsnis „Storulių muzika“, dažnai laikomas simboline antidžiazo retorikos pradžia.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Sovietų Sąjunga, džiazo situacija, dviprasmybės, XX a. trečiasis dešimtmetis.

## Introduction

The year 2022 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet jazz. According to Soviet/Russian jazz popularizer and author of the first book on Soviet jazz Alexey Batashev<sup>1</sup> (1972), the date of the birth of the music is October 1, 1922, when Valentin Parnakh arranged the first concert with his First Eccentric Orchestra of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – Valentin Parnakh's Jazz Band. Paradoxically, it happened just a few months<sup>2</sup> before the legal formation of the Soviet Union – the conglomerate which, during the 70 years of its existence, established an entire new historical era full of contradictions.

Like all other cultural forms in the Soviet Union, jazz was affected by the ambiguities appearing synchronically in the relationship between power and society, and diachronically with politically sanctioned changes in almost every new decade. We have seen constantly oscillating political tolerance,<sup>3</sup> where jazz was highly accepted, for example, during WWII when it symbolized the friendship between the Allies, disliked during the late-Stalinist ideological campaigns in the climate of the rising Cold War confrontations,

or prized and hated concurrently as demonstrated in 1936, where the official newspapers *Izvestia* and *Pravda* respectively attacked and supported jazz (Beresford 2017: 18). At the same time, state regulations aiming to control the production and dissemination of culture, besides forcing jazz to fit into the Soviet system ideologically and administratively, provided actors the opportunity to take advantage of state sponsorship. On the other hand, jazz settled in urban areas while holding a rather elitist status and involving enthusiastic practitioners who created the music, organizers supporting it, and listeners enjoying it.

This article explores the ambiguities around the status of Soviet jazz, which has meant that jazz in the Soviet Union has been discussed in a variety of ways in popular and academic spheres, in oral and written discourse, or within different language communities. This variability is examined in the first part of the essay, where based on the thoughts of Russian jazz historians and my own experiences, the popular oral discourse is addressed with reference to myth theory. The historiographical overview focuses on investigations by historians of Russian origin writing in their native language and academics part of current jazz scholarship



**Figure 1.** Caricature from *Sovetskaya Muzyka* (1948, No. 5, p. 90) mocking jazz: “Mister Spike Joans organized a sensational jazz orchestra featuring a goat. Who needs emotions and melody in our atomic century? Sing, goat, a requiem to art.”

in the West. The second part of the article illustrates the ambiguous status of Soviet jazz by providing insights into the socio-cultural and political conditions surrounding the appearance of jazz in the early 1920s and demonstrates how anti-jazz attacks first emerged at the end of the decade, initiated by the pronouncements of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). According to a common stance, RAPM’s jazz-inimical rhetoric relied on Maxim Gorky’s article “The Music of the Gross” from 1928, introduced in the final part of the article. The lengthy overview discloses the ironic disproportion between the importance that has been attributed to the article in Soviet jazz history and its actual focus, which is irrelevant to jazz.

### Soviet jazz discourse

Since the initial idea of this essay derives from my own experiences with jazz, the discussion is opened with some personal insights into the status of the music. My first encounters with live jazz were from the early 1980s, when as an ardent enthusiast attending the student jazz festivals in Tallinn, I had no idea about the ambiguities circulating around the music. Later, when Estonia had regained its independence in the 1990s, my opinion was undermined during the post-separation legitimization processes designed to strengthen the state at the domestic level and ensure a new political order.<sup>4</sup> Part of those processes were to negativize the entire Soviet legacy and to emphasize the system’s repressiveness. In this context jazz was exposed as something at odds with Soviet power, which consequently led most naturally to its prohibition. A popular dictum which supposedly appeared during the Soviet era illustrates the situation: “Today you play jazz and tomorrow betray your motherland.” As a frequent subject of praise in artworks especially those of socialist realism, the word “motherland”

had special meaning in the Soviet ideologically driven public discourse, symbolizing a particular holiness and a person’s overwhelming love towards their country. According to the simplistic Soviet rhetoric, those who fought for the “motherland” were surrounded by a heroic aura, but those whose actions diverged from ideology-driven aims were blamed for the betrayal of the country.

Afterwards, during the research phase, I faced contradictions in the findings, which indicated that there were constantly changing levels of tolerance towards jazz among the authorities – this information contrasted with the popular simplistic claims about the banned status of the music. In oral discourse, the tendency to present jazz as a forbidden type of music was disclosed, for instance, in the recollections of musicians and music functionaries interviewed during my research, who affectively expressed dissatisfaction with the anti-jazz stance of the regime. This inclination might stem from the particularities of Soviet-era memories, which according to Corner (2009: 12), possess a bias towards being subjective, have been distorted over time, and are likely to idealize events. Memories of dictatorships tend to present the actors as victims of the regime, where culpability is inevitably attached to someone else; therefore, suffering individuals oppose the repressive state. In a similar vein, simplistic oppositions are produced where, on the one hand, Soviet power is blamed for repressing jazz, while, on the other hand, we have the music and musicians whose almost heroic struggle ensured the survival of jazz.

Surprisingly enough, and not uncommonly, I have encountered the need to comment on the question of the “jazz ban” and the resistance acts musicians supposedly exerted towards the prohibitions of the regime. Whether during discussions at conferences or backstage, occasional face-to-face conversations with scholars not familiar with the issues of jazz and the Soviet era, the teaching of the course on Soviet jazz history, or encounters with journalists, my own argumentation in similar cases submits the brief claim that jazz had a constantly changing status in society dependent on the degree of politically initiated tolerance, and that the music was never actually banned in the literal sense of the word.

Against the public claims about jazz as a forbidden music genre in the Soviet Union are the pronouncements of Soviet and Russian jazz historian Vladimir Feiertag,<sup>5</sup> who categorically denies the truthfulness of this narrative. “I am totally against the statement that jazz in Stalin’s times or later was banned,” he stated in the opening of his article “How jazz was banned in Soviet Union” (Feiertag 2016). According to him, there exists no official documents on the prohibition of jazz but:

Soviet society lived in a double morality – we said one thing, thought another and acted the third [...] mismatch.<sup>6</sup>

In those conditions part of peoples' tactics was to learn how to pay lip service to ideological clichés while continuing to fulfil their goals (Feiertag 2018: 177). Cyril Moshkow, a Russian jazz journalist and writer, confirms Feiertag's claims, stating that even in the period 1946–1955, when the word jazz disappeared from public usage, and which Leonid Utyosov later mockingly called “the era of unbending saxophones,” jazz was not explicitly banned but rather furiously criticized, and playing the music was “not recommended” (Moshkow 2017).

The tendency to depict Soviet jazz as a victim of the power has often emerged among those not familiar with the particularities of Soviet jazz. As Feiertag mentioned:

The question I have been frequently asked by foreign journalists and researchers has been, ‘Please tell us how many jazz musicians died in the Gulag?’

I have been in the archives and haven't found any documents proving it. Six persons punished but none of them for playing jazz. One saxophonist, for instance, was arrested because he communicated with Americans and got records and reeds. During the most severe Stalinist period you could be imprisoned and shot just because you existed.<sup>7</sup>

The persistence and power of the spread of unwarranted popular narratives on the forbidden status of jazz in the Soviet Union refer to the myth-making qualities of the idea. The properties of myths are endorsed by Heehs (1994: 2), who defines myth as a “set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture of speech community and that serves to found to affirm its self-conception,” and claims that myth consists more generally “of any set of related propositions whose ‘truth’ is not demonstrated by the working of logos.”<sup>8</sup> Barthes's (1991) claim about myth as unexamined assumption emphasizes their rootedness in the prevailing political order. Regarding the global politics of jazz during the Cold War era, the status of the music was characterized “by rival interpretations of jazz as a symbol of Western liberal democracy on the one hand, and the sound of cultural imperialism on the other” (Havas 2022: 87).

The historiography of Soviet jazz demonstrates great variations in perspectives. Soviet/Russian authors on jazz publishing predominantly in Russian<sup>9</sup> have shown relatively low interest in the social and political aspects surrounding the music. Rather their focus has been more on the “universal” aesthetic values of the music or its historical course. For instance, the extensive volume of articles from 1987 included chapters on jazz theory and aesthetics, performers, and recordings (see Medvedyev & Medvedyeva 1987). The published heritage of the greatest Soviet jazz authority, an eyewitness of the Soviet/Russian jazz history from the end of WWII, Vladimir Feiertag, comprises a collection of four historical volumes largely based on his

personal recollections. The first book on Soviet jazz is by Alexey Batashev (1972) and gives valuable information on musicians, events, musical developments, and styles. Those politically “neutral” views form a contrast with Yefim Barban's model of jazz-as-resistance, for whom the *Kvadrat* magazine signifies a second, alternative culture, opposed to Soviet agitation propaganda.<sup>10</sup> The *samizdat*<sup>11</sup> publication *Kvadrat*, launched in 1965 and considered foundational in the tradition of Soviet jazz scholarship and criticism, was an elitist journal with a wide range of sophisticated theoretical and analytical writings on jazz aesthetics, philosophy, and the semiotics of jazz improvisation and perception.<sup>12</sup> Among the authors of the bulletin were leading jazz experts and critics: Alexey Batashev, Vladimir Feiertag, Valery Petrov, Dmitry Ukhov, Andrey Solovyov, Tatyana Didenko, Georgy Vasyutochkin, Artemy Troitsky, Alexander Kan, Yuri Vermenich, and Yefim Barban. Recent publications such as the collection of articles *Rossiyskiy dzhaz* (2013) follow the practices of the authors' predecessors in focusing on the biographies of the musicians, their music, and history.

The only comprehensive monograph on Soviet jazz accessible to an English-speaking readership is still Frederick S. Starr's *Red & Hot: The Fate of Jazz in The Soviet Union* (1983), first published 40 years ago. Rich in historical facts and narratives, the reading of it, however, assumes certain reservations in terms of some of the author's claims, which obviously derive from Cold War perspectives.<sup>13</sup> For example, his conclusions contain the argument that “any creative art form will ultimately fail in Russia because moralistic bureaucrats overregulate and overcontrol” (Starr 1983: 317). Although culture in the Soviet Union was highly regulated, it produced a great number of valuable artworks that obtained recognition in domestic and international arenas.

Recent Western scholarship of Soviet jazz,<sup>14</sup> especially in the works of historians of German origin, has significantly increased in quantity during the last ten years. Following the tendencies in Soviet studies,<sup>15</sup> investigations predominantly apply a synthetic approach emphasizing the role of individual agency as well as Soviet power, with ideology-related shifts and turns reflected in the official status of jazz. For Rüdiger Ritter, the field of jazz constituted:

[...] a large playing field in the states of the former Eastern Bloc in that it was as experimental for both artists and social opportunities, yet never failed to also display some of the playful elements typical to jazz. (Ritter 2016: 18)

His critique is targeted against simple black-and-white ways of presenting jazz in the Eastern Bloc, where the artistic field of activity is divided between official and unofficial, where the first is ascribed to conformity and the other to confrontation with “the system” (ibid.).

### The Reception of Jazz in the 1920s

The entry of jazz into the culture of Soviet Russia in the early 1920s was framed by the nurturing environment of the New Economic Policy (NEP) proposed by Vladimir Lenin in 1921 as a strategic retreat from socialism – a transition structuring the possibilities for change (Fitzpatrick 1974: 33). The NEP was assigned to provide a “breathing space” for Soviet society to recover from the cataclysms of the First World War, the revolution, its aftermath, the civil war, and the dictatorial policies of War Communism<sup>16</sup> before achieving socialism (Ginzburg 2019: 24). This new policy facilitated the development of small private entrepreneurship, including the leisure and entertainment industry and the formation of a middle class (the so-called “Nepmen”), which became the main consumers of culture.<sup>17</sup> In the conditions of the NEP, the state was keen to encourage art that broke with tradition, and futurism, with its novelty and extremism, aspired to become a state art. This status was confirmed by Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment in October 1918, who officially proclaimed that the arts should be developed on an experimental basis,<sup>18</sup> suggesting relatively harmonious relations between artists and the government. Russian futurists artists, poets, musicians, and architects saw futurism as the artistic equivalent of the revolution’s attempt to rebuild society on a new foundation and enthusiastically embraced the new possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

The relative freedoms in economics and culture enabled connections between the young socialist state and the West, resulting in the incursion of Western culture and its mass media imaginary, including jazz as the first popular musical form disseminated globally. Society returning to civilized existence needed entertainment after the harsh years of the civil war and the period of War Communism. Jazz became one of the many cultural forms serving citizens’ needs for recreation in urban areas, primarily among radically minded representatives of the creative intelligentsia (Kovalenko 2013).

The “infiltration” of jazz into Soviet cultural life was part of two enthusiasms in the early 1920s, when theater and dance swept through the Soviet Union to an unprecedented extent. Dance mania in Russia reflected a postwar European-wide rejection of the sober and self-controlled respectability common to the Victorian era (Gorsuch 1994: 9). Those who danced modern dances felt emotional relief from the traumas of war and post-revolutionary problems (Ginzburg 2019: 24). The term “jazz” described for dancers primarily a wide variety of modish dances from the Charleston to foxtrot, in which syncopated rhythms provided accompaniment for new modes of bodily self-expression (Ginzburg 2019: 31).

Theater mania was considered something unparalleled in European culture since the French Revolution (Ginzburg 2019: 23). Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of the seminal forces in modern theater, employed American popular music for mood and intermission entertainment as well as incorporated it directly in the production (Ginzburg 2019: 29). In 1923 he staged the play *D. E.*,<sup>20</sup> including the transformation of a political review into a musical and dance (Ginzburg 2019: 29). This trial to “ideologize” jazz represented a “decaying West” by “the lascivious dance of the decaying civilization,” which included tangos, shimmies, and foxtrots, performed by Valentin Parnakh’s jazz band. The reviewers generally praised Parnakh’s masterful performance rather than emphasized the satirical condemnation of Western decadence. Furthermore, the scenes depicting capitalist decadence where sexy dancing girls in black mesh hose and tights moving to a pulsating jazz accompaniment were more exciting and “real” than the scenes depicting the good, clean, upright proletarian man (Ginzburg 2019: 31)

Parnakh, a poet, musician, dancer, and choreographer, has been given a place of honor by historians of Russian jazz as a Soviet jazz pioneer who marked the beginning of Russian jazz history with the first concert of the “First Eccentric Orchestra of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – Valentin Parnakh’s Jazz Band,” which took place on October 1, 1922, at the State Institute of Theater Art in Moscow (Batashev 1972: 8–12).<sup>21</sup> Parnakh’s first concerts were followed by a wave of press coverage. The reviewers enthused at jazz’s attempt to capture the pulse and rhythm of city life and to theatricalize its movements and gestures. Parnakh’s jazz band was compared to Forreger’s noise orchestra<sup>22</sup> and extolled for its superior melodic and rhythmic qualities. “If there is ‘too little seasoning’ in a jazz band in terms of noise, then in a noise orchestra there is a feeling of ‘too little seasoning’ in terms of music,” they claimed (Kravchinskiy 2015: 110).

Parnakh and his orchestra cooperated with state propaganda activities while performing in the first All Union Exhibition of Agriculture in 1923 for delegates of the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in Summer 1924 (Batashev 1972: 12) and took part in the May Day parade of 1923 (Kravchinskiy 2015: 111). Among Parnakh’s contributions were also the “invention” of the very spelling of the word “jazz” in Russian based on phonetics rather than reproducing the English spelling and the publication of the first article on jazz in Russian called “Jazz Band – Not a Noise Orchestra,” where he insists that jazz orchestras and noise orchestras could not be compared as equal. In his writings Parnakh spoke poetically on the universality of expressive cultures in general and argued that syncopated rhythms, musical lamentations and entreaties, mastery of improvisation, or call-and-response structures have always existed as archetypal, universal, and humanistic artistic

forms historically and socially, making transitions from one cultural milieu to another (Ginzburg 2019: 27). Moreover, the innovative music and dance generated within its “syn-copated entrails” became the primary theme of a number of Parnakh’s early poems (Ginzburg 2019: 25).

One of the distinguishing features of early Soviet jazz, which also explains the lack of wide appeal of the music, was that it remained almost exclusively the property of the intelligentsia – writers, artists, musicians, scientists, and engineers (Kovalenko 2013). Partly because of that, jazz was extensively supported by the progressive, modernist wing of Russia’s musical establishment, the Association of Contemporary Music (ACM),<sup>23</sup> whose main activity was sponsoring concerts, mostly of chamber music, to small, elite audiences.

On the other hand, widely regarded as the main antagonist of early Soviet jazz was the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM).<sup>24</sup> Among its targets was ACM, which it considered as exemplifying the elitism and bankruptcy of bourgeois culture. RAPM, established in 1923, was the sister organization to several ultra-militant arts groups in the 1920s Soviet Union, such as RAPP (Rossiiskaia Associatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei, the Russian Association of Proletariat Writers) and the OSE (Obshchestvo Sovetskoi Estrady, the Society of Soviet Estrada), and called for the liquidation of its “bourgeois” opponents and a condemnation of those who did not share its principles as class enemies with primitive cultural tastes (Khiterer 2017: 39). RAPM’s aim was to make Soviet music more “proletarian” in terms of the class background of creative individuals and the content of music, although its platform was vague – it seemed to have very little idea of what the ideologically correct mass music of the proletariat should sound like (Nelson 2002).<sup>25</sup> In any event, RAPM proposed music that was “intelligible to the masses” and was dissatisfied with both the established classical canon (including nineteenth-century Russian composers) as well as with avant-garde “formalist” movement for being too “bourgeois” (Nelson 2004).

RAPM’s particular disdain was directed at “light genres” including jazz, “Gypsy songs,” lyrical romances, and other forms of *estrada*. Such forms of light music were despised especially because of their lyricism and emotive nature, which for RAPMists was a sign of bourgeois individualism that impeded the collectiveness necessary to achieve the industrialization goals of the First Five-Year Plan. The music should be politically and ideologically engaged in the task of enlightening the masses and helping to fulfill the country’s economic goals (Nelson 2004: 118). The fierce criticism towards jazz was intensified especially following the cultural revolution from 1928 to 1932, when RAPMists argued that jazz was an obstacle to mobilizing workers and peasants to fulfill the Five-Year Plan. According to them, jazz

music “fogs [the worker’s] consciousness and leads him away from the ranks of active fighters for socialism” (ibid: 121). Similarly to those who disliked jazz in the West, RAPM members excoriated the connections between jazz and sexuality. Especially dangerous was dancing that encouraged moral laxity (ibid: 124).

### “On Music of the Gross”

RAPM’s anti-jazz stance was strengthened by Maxim Gorky’s infamous article “O muzyke tolstykh” (On Music of the Gross), published in *Pravda*, on April 18, 1928. It was immediately picked up by the leadership of the organization, who turned it into a symbolic articulation of the organization’s hatred of jazz (Starr 1983: 89). This almost unobtrusive article in a newspaper to which Gorky was a frequent contributor supposedly signified an important milestone in the discourse of Soviet jazz history – a kind of symbolic beginning of the Soviet jazz ban rhetoric, heated by the conflicting “creeds” of Soviet ideology and jazz. As claimed by Batashev:

The phrase “Music of the Gross” was repeated since then onwards [...] those words of Gorky were used by some voices as the only exhaustive label for characterising jazz. (Batashev 1972: 31)<sup>26</sup>

Although the title makes reference to music, the focus of article itself is not predominantly about music but rather can be summarized in the mode of the typical Soviet rhetoric – to show the superiority of Soviet life over the “degenerate” West, where modern music is part of this process of decline. The word jazz, in fact, is mentioned only once and even then, not in a way we might expect based on the notoriety of the article as a symbol of the Soviet jazz ban. The following overview of Gorky’s article will shed some light on the dilemmas framing the article.

Gorky wrote his article while living in Sorrento during his second exile.<sup>27</sup> The opening passage is a poetic, picturesque description of an Italian night where the “light streams silently from the silver-chased leaves of the olive trees” and “the orange and yellow fruits also gleam through the transparent silvery haze.”<sup>28</sup> In the absolute silence of the Italian night, his thoughts flow to the “inexhaustible power of labor” and the scientific workers whose contribution enables people to live “in an era when the gap between the wildest fantasies and absolutely practical realities is diminishing with incredible speed.” Subsequent lengthy citations from a letter from somebody called comrade Andrey Bakharev discuss the contributions of “two miracle workers,” who were horticulturists, the American Luther Burbank and “our genius,” Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin. These two men had a lot in common:

Both began their work in early youth, both were poor, both were great thinkers, artists and inventors. Both have made magnificent discoveries in the realm of plant breeding. (From Gorky's article)

Gorky's ruminations are suddenly disturbed by an "idiotic hammer" beating – the foxtrot sound coming from the radio of the neighboring hotel. The following is Gorky's angry description of the music is the best-known part of the article, cited in numerous writings over almost a century.

But, suddenly, in the brooding silence of the night, some idiotic hammer begins to beat starkly. One, two, three, ten, twenty strokes – and then there descends, like a lump of mud falling into crystal, translucent water, a savage howling, whistling, roaring, rattling, shrieking and grinding; inhuman voices rend the air, resembling the neighing of horses; one's ear is assaulted by the grunting of brass pigs, the blare of asses, the amorous quacking of gigantic frogs. All this insulting and insane cacophony is subordinated to a scarcely perceptible rhythm and, listening to this pandemonium for a minute or two, one involuntarily begins to imagine that it is the performance of an orchestra of lunatics, driven mad by sex, and conducted by a human stallion wielding an enormous phallus.<sup>29</sup>

"This is music for the fat men" declares Gorky in his all-encompassing rage, after the rhythm to which "fat men and women are lewdly wriggling their thighs [...] wallowing in obscenity, simulating the procreative act." For those people "love is nothing else but a perversion of the imagination of the passionate urge of the licentious flesh." The fat man is a marauder, a parasite who lives on the labor of others, a semi-human whose motto is "After me, the deluge." In opposition to their love is real love, stimulating "the creative powers of men and women." Finally, Gorky's rage finds its outpouring in anathematizing the "worldwide herd of fat men that are trampling upon culture, and they cannot help realizing that the proletariat is the only power capable of saving culture and of deepening and widening it."

Meanwhile, the "evolution" of degeneracy is characterized by the decline of beauty in music, where the minuet and the animated passion of the waltz are changed by the lewdness of the foxtrot and the convulsions of the Charleston. Oppressed "Negroes" were among the creators of jazz and they "no doubt laugh up their sleeves as they see their masters, the whites, evolving to that savage state from which the American Negroes have risen and which they are leaving farther and farther behind."

The "Music of the Gross" tirade terminates in a deafening crescendo, and then Gorky's thoughts return home. He quotes the rural correspondent who describes the country life in the spirit of Soviet rhetoric, praising the Soviet order and its fertile conditions in which people can finally live. The youthful optimism and flourishing life of the country has made a 72-year-old grandma claim that "I would join the

Young Communists, but, alas, I am too old. Why did it all begin so late!" "It is really wonderful to be living and working in our times," resounds Gorky's summarizing phrase.

Gorky's personal motivation to write this angry piece is argued by Starr (1983: 88) to be the writer's fading reputation in the West. While he had been taken up as an exotic in Western literary circles and became the first Russian novelist to have outsold Tolstoy, his fame had begun to decline, and his bitterness towards modern culture was revenge on the West that had rejected him (Starr 1983: 138). Another source<sup>30</sup> speculates that Gorky wrote "The Music of the Gross" in the evening when he had problems with falling asleep, and to take advantage of his insomnia, he wrote article while empathizing with others who were also awake.

Contradictory claims have been made regarding Gorky's attitude towards jazz. According to Starr (1983: 92), the writer had an animus towards jazz and refers to an incident in a restaurant in which he, after an hour of listening to a Black group playing, stomped out of the hall. According to Russian journalist and music historian Vladimir Marotchkin, Gorky, instead, was positive about jazz. His argument relies on an episode with the musical comedy Jolly Fellows,<sup>31</sup> where his acceptance, "Good! I felt like I was on vacation for a month!" became decisive in allowing the film to screen after the ban imposed by Commissar of Education Comrade Bubnov.

### Contradictions of Soviet Jazz

The interpretation of claims of a Soviet jazz ban as a myth directs us to common debates over "truth versus falsity," where history and myths are opposed. This has led, according to Jan Assmann (1997: 14), to "an all-too antiseptic conception of 'pure facts' as opposed to the egocentrism of myth-making memory." The mythical elements of history have, as he claims, nothing to do with its truth values, since history turns into myth as soon as it is woven into the fabric of the present as remembered, narrated and used (Assmann 1997: 14). Assmann's stance inspires me to present the argument that myths, in fact, have their own value because they tell us something that dry facts never do – about human experience and emotions, and what matters is how the myths appear and what is their content, not their truth value. Myths are an integral part of history, and if we ignore them, we also ignore an important part of time and its story. Besides, mythologies possess durable qualities due to their tendency to resonate with us in the present moment by serving an important cultural function, giving form to the codes and conventions by which we live our lives (Whyton 2010: 135). Now, retrospectively, Soviet-era myths express certain often contradictory emotional qualities. For instance, many of those without a lived experience of the era tend to hold

an indisputable wrathful belief that repressions and the Soviet era are synonyms. According to this simplistic pattern, it was almost inherent for Soviet citizens to be resistant to the regime. Alternatively, there are the opinions of those whose life trajectories were part of the era. Here, the nostalgia-driven emotions about the “lost” times could be expressed in the form of jokes and humor, interpreting the paradoxes and inadequacies of the era through the prism of irony and mockery.<sup>32</sup> The straightforward convictions about the possibility of life outside socialist society are expressed by the individuals with escapist tendencies.<sup>33</sup>

Myths are integral also to the discourses on jazz, where, as Whyton has asserted, “the promotion of a teleological, causal narrative has led to history taking on what is often a melodramatic and romanticized character” (Whyton 2010: 134). The topology of jazz myths holds the stories of jazz as an expression of independent African-American culture, of the alignment of the aesthetic status of jazz with classical music, of jazz musicians as often dysfunctional individualistic outsiders and hipsters, “rebels without a cause,” or of jazz as a gesture of freedom (Sanchirico 2012; Whyton 2010; Johnson 2018). This list can be complemented with the Soviet jazz myth, declaring that jazz was a forbidden music under the conditions of the Soviet regime and to play this music was an act of resistance. The myth of the “Soviet jazz ban” derives partly from the premise about the oppositional nature of popular artistic expression in totalitarian or authoritarian societies, as Klenke (2019: 55) claims. This “heroic” model interprets rebellious actions against oppressive conditions by certain musical actors as morally superior examples of *homines politici*. In a similar vein, Havas (2022: 86) argues that calling the inclination to constitute jazz in socialist countries as an inherently political subject with a counter-cultural function is a “revolutionary myth.” The discourse politicizing art was established in order to legitimize or undermine conflicting ideologies during the Cold War era.

When jazz first appeared in the Soviet Union, it found fertile soil. Under the NEP, the state supported art to develop in entirely new ways. Futurism, while becoming a state art, sought to revolutionize artistic language and forms by focusing on continuous forward movement, dynamism, and dialectical self-renewal. Radically minded representatives of the creative intelligentsia oriented towards the modern West avidly discovered the world of jazz among other cultural phenomena while assuring the music’s status in the high strata of culture not opposed to academic music (Kovalenko 2013). In the late 1920s, the RAPM rejected as ideologically corrupt every strand of existing musical culture – modernist concert music, the various kinds of popular music, including jazz, highlighting specific political anxieties of the time related to the major transformation of society – collectivization and industrialization (Kovalenko 2013).

The beginning of anti-jazz attacks in the late 1920s was the moment when the dilemma of global modernity versus the Soviet ideological paradigm appeared. The modernist futuristic tendencies first framing the appearance of jazz were then considered incompatible with the ideas of the conquest of “proletarian hegemony” during the cultural revolution, including the campaign against bourgeois intellectuals, and the proletarianization of culture, meaning the politicization and proletarian seizure of power on the cultural front (Fitzpatrick 1974).

Paradoxically, Gorky’s article, frequently presented as emblematic of a Soviet “jazz ban” was not about jazz but rather a glorification of Soviet life with an angry attack on its antithesis, the Western world, following the typical anti-West patterns of Soviet rhetoric. Furthermore, the music Gorky heard from the radio was not jazz. Undoubtedly, he was outraged by some kind of “restaurant music,” far from “genuine” jazz. Not jazz, but a “fat herd” dancing to vulgar restaurant music: that was Gorky’s main target (Batashev 1972: 30).<sup>34</sup> While writing his infamous article in 1928, it is arguable that Gorky had no intention of initiating any anti-jazz campaigns or proclaim “death” to jazz. But the timing of the appearance of the article was apposite for the RAPM who, in their rage against jazz, seized on the article, making it a symbol of the beginning of the jazz-inimical rhetoric in Soviet jazz discourse. However, there is only minor recorded evidence on the latter argument with Starr’s book as a main source. This inspires us to question the relevancy of the claim on the importance of Gorky’s article and to qualify it rather as another Soviet jazz myth produced on the basis of Starr’s assertion.

Despite the rhetoric initiated by the RAPM, jazz music developed further when, for instance, in 1929 Leonid Utyosov formed his famous *Tea-Jazz* (abbreviation for Theatrical Jazz) band, or Alexander Tsfasman made its first recording and prepared the first jazz radio program in the Soviet Union with his AMA-jazz orchestra in 1928 (Feiertag 2010).

But as we know, the controversies around jazz were not unique to the Soviet Union. In the United States, it was variously perceived as quintessentially American or dangerously un-American (Gusejnova 2016: 29). As an agent of social change, it was threatening to those with a vested interest in maintaining an established cultural hierarchy (Henson 2016: 121). In Europe, jazz was associated with anxieties about modernity. It was an American music representing “chaos, machine, noise,” but also a triumph of “new melody, new color,” which constituted a break from the old-fashioned comforts of an earlier era (Gusejnova 2016: 30).

Finally, against the assertions of those who like to emphasize the exceptional status of jazz in the Soviet Union (and the Eastern Bloc) is the pronouncement by Rüdiger

Ritter (2019: 68), that the structure of jazz history in the Eastern Bloc by no means differs from the structure of jazz history in other parts of the world; only the specific conditions in detail were different. Everywhere in the world, jazz life was and is the result of negotiations and compromises by several parts of society. What makes the situation distinct in different parts of the world are the varying social and cultural conditions under which jazz evolved.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alexey Batashev (Алексей Баташев, 1934–2021) was a Russian jazz critic, historian and popularizer of jazz.
- <sup>2</sup> The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established on 30 December 1922.
- <sup>3</sup> For changing tolerance see for instance: Lücke 2007; Beresford 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> On the new narrative strategies about Estonia's past see for instance: Tamm 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Vladimir Feiertag (Владимир Фейертаг, b. 1934) is a Soviet and Russian jazz historian, popularizer and organizer. He is the author the first comprehensive guide to Russian jazz articles: Владимир Фейертаг, *Джаз в России: краткий энциклопедический справочник* [Jazz in Russia: A Short Encyclopedic Guide], St Petersburg: Skifiia, 2009. His other publications include: 1999. *Джаз от Ленинграда до Петербурга* [Jazz from Leningrad to Petersburg], St Petersburg: Kult Inform Press, 1999; *История джазового исполнительства в России* [History of jazz performance in Russia], St Petersburg: Skifiia, 2010; *А Почему Джаз?* [Why Jazz?], St Petersburg: Skifiia, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with Feiertag, 10 March 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Feiertag, 10 March 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> Since the time of the Greeks, mythos (the word as decisive, final pronouncement) has been contrasted to logos (the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated).
- <sup>9</sup> The exception is for instance Feigin, Leo. 1985. *Russian Jazz. New Identity*. New York: Quartet Books Limited.
- <sup>10</sup> The articles of Barban are collected in: Ефим Барбан [Yefim Barban], *Джазовые опыты* [Jazz Experiences], St Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> Self-publishing, non-censored underground publishing across the Eastern Bloc.
- <sup>12</sup> See Barban 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> In addition, Georg Avakian in his archival papers refers several times to inaccuracies in Starr's book. See, for instance, his comments on Charles Lloyd's visit to the Tallinn '67 jazz festival in George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian's papers in New York Public Library, 61.26. Avakian's letter to Tommy Cecil.
- <sup>14</sup> For recent writings see, for instance: Rüdiger Ritter, Broadcasting Jazz into the Eastern Bloc – Cold War Weapon or Cultural Exchange? The Example of Willis Conover, in: *Jazz Perspectives*, Vol. 7(2), 2013, p. 111–131; Rüdiger Ritter, Negotiated Spaces: Jazz in Moscow after the Thaw, in: *Meanings of Jazz in State Socialism*, eds. Gertrud Pickhan & Rüdiger Ritter (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016, p. 171–192; Rüdiger Ritter, Jazz in Moscow after Stalinism, in: *Jazz and Totalitarianism*, Bruce Johnson (ed.), London: Routledge, 2017, p. 69–93; Michel Abeser, *Den*
- Jazz sowjetisch machen: Kulturelle Leitbilder. Musikmarkt und Distinktion zwischen 1953 und 1970*, Köln: Bohrlau Verlag, 2018; Michel Abeser, Progressiv weil national? Estland und die Neuerfindung des sowjetischen Jazz zwischen 1953 und 1970, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte osteuropas*, Vol. 67(3), 2019, p. 424–446; Michel Abeser, Jazz, Soviet Culture, and the Limits of a Bipolar World, 2019, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/archiv-2019/jazz-soviet-culture-and-the-limits-of-a-bipolar-world>; Martin Lücke, The Postwar Campaign against Jazz in the USSR (1945–1953), in: *Jazz Behind the Iron Curtain*, G. Pickhan and R. Ritter (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 83–98; Gleb Tsipursky, Jazz, Power, and Soviet Youth in the Early Cold War, in: *The Journal of musicology*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2016, p. 332–361. My own works include among others: Heli Reimann, *Tallinn '67 Jazz Festival: Myths and Memories*, Routledge, 2022; Heli Reimann, The (New) Awakening of Soviet Jazz Culture in 1960s, in: *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 45(4), 2022, p. 467–485; Heli Reimann, Late-Stalinist Ideological Campaigns and the Rupture of Jazz: 'Jazz Talk' in the Soviet Estonian Cultural Newspaper Sirp ja Vasar, in: *Popular Music*, Vol. 33(3), 2014, p. 509–529.
- <sup>15</sup> The perspectives from below and above were joined in the works of the so-called third school in Soviet studies, the "post-revisionism" emerging in the 1990s. For instance, Stephen Kotkin (1995) overcomes the state/society distinction with the application of De Certeau's "grand strategies of the state" and the "little tactics of the habitat"; Mark Edele (2009) argues for the interaction, overlap, or "inter-penetration" between different aspects of the social whole.
- <sup>16</sup> War Communism was the name given to the economic system that existed in Russia from 1918 to 1921.
- <sup>17</sup> NEP was primarily a new agricultural policy.
- <sup>18</sup> "Манифест Летучей Федерации Футуристов" [Manifest Letuchei Federacii Futuristov] ("The Manifesto of the Flying Federation of Futurists"), in: *Gazeta Futuristov*, No. 1, 15 March 1918. As cited in Smirnov & Pchelkina 2011: 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Numerous experimenters included Valery Avraamov, who created one of the world's first synthetic sounds predating synthesizers by 20 years, and Leon Theremin, who created the Thereminvox (also known as the Theremin), the first electronic instrument marketed on the world stage (Smirnov & Pchelkina 2011). The price of the radicalism, however, was a drastic narrowing of the audience for this music, which often degenerated into obscure academicism, as exemplified by the plethora of esoteric research projects inventing new musical instruments as well as scales and tonal systems in early 1920s Russia (Smirnov & Pchelkina 2011).
- <sup>20</sup> *D. E. (Give Us Europe!)*, 1924), based on Ilya Ehrenburg's science fantasy novel, *Trest D. E.* and Bernard Kellerman's *The Tunnels*, and touched upon novels by Pierre Hamp and Upton Sinclair.
- <sup>21</sup> Parnakh himself appeared on stage as a "plastic" dancer.
- <sup>22</sup> *Шумовой оркестр* [Shumovyi orkestr / Noise Orchestra] – this type of orchestra appeared in 1920 as a response to the claim that music should be an expression of the highly collective and cooperative labor of modern society. In addition to musical instruments, they used industrial engines, turbines, dynamos, sirens, hooters, and bells to generate performances within factories.
- <sup>23</sup> The organization was set up in 1923. The music was modernist, rather than avant-garde, in that it sought to be at the cutting



edge of the classical canon, rather than aiming to achieve a rupture with tradition (Abel 2019).

- <sup>24</sup> Boris Schwarz in his book *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1981* (Indiana University Press, 1983) mentions that RAPM “succeeded in having jazz banned as ‘bourgeois decadence’. Even a writer of the stature of Maxim Gorky spoke out against its capitalist connotations, in *Muzyka tolstykh*.” His reference to Gorky’s article includes incorrect year.
- <sup>25</sup> RAPM was disbanded in 1932, since Stalin had no longer needed militant cultural radicals, who had insisted on continuing the Cultural Revolution.
- <sup>26</sup> Google search by keyword “музыка толстых” (music of the gross) gives thousands of responses indicating that the phrase was synonymous with jazz. Reference to the idea is found also in Ojakäär 2008: 73; and in Moshkow & Filipieva 2013: 4.
- <sup>27</sup> His first exile took place from 1906 to 1913 when he lived on the island of Capri. Second exile took place between 1921–1932.
- <sup>28</sup> Further in the text, all English quotations from Gorky’s article are based on English version “On the Music of the Gross. Maksim Gorky, on the Music of the Degenerate. April 18, 1928”, available at: <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/upheaval-in-the-opera/upheaval-in-the-opera-text/on-the-music-of-the-gross/>.
- <sup>29</sup> This frequently cited excerpt is found for instance in Gordinsky’s book (1950: 85) or in online articles: <https://evnreport.com/arts-and-culture/from-censorship-to-state-sponsorship-the-fate-of-jazz-in-the-soviet-union-and-armenia/>, <https://www.x-rayaudio.com/x-rayaudioblog/2017/12/20/totalitarian-jazz>.
- <sup>30</sup> Владимир Марочкин [Vladimir Marotchkin], «Музыка толстых» Голливуда и вырождение культуры США — М. Горький знал? [“Music of the Gross” Hollywood and the Degeneration of US Culture – Did M. Gorky Know?], <https://regnum.ru/news/cultura/3479526.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> he movie, also translated as *Happy-Go-Lucky Guys, Moscow Laughs and Jazz Comedy*, is a 1934 popular Soviet musical comedy, directed by Grigory Aleksandrov, and starring his wife Lyubov Orlova and the jazz singer and comic actor Leonid Utyosov. The comedy was an extraordinary success with the audience. In the same year, the film *Merry Fellows* went to the Venice Film Festival, where it received awards for directing and music and was included among the six best films in the world.
- <sup>32</sup> For Soviet nostalgia see, for instance, “Bone Music” (<https://www.x-rayaudio.com/x-rayaudioblog/2017/12/20/totalitarian-jazzlikonja>); Velikonja Mitja, Lost in Transition. Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 23(4), 2009, p. 535–551; Kristi Jõesalu, We Were the Children of a Romantic Era: Nostalgia and the Nonideological Everyday Through the Perspective of ‘Silent Generation’, in: *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47(4), 2018, p. 557–577.
- <sup>33</sup> On the subject see for instance author’s article on Soviet jazz fandom: Heli Reimann, Those Who Built ‘Socialism with Jazz Face’: Soviet Jazz Fandom in 1960s and Latvian Jazz fan Leonid Nidbalsky, in: *Mūzikas akadēmijas raksti*, Vol. XX, 2022, p. 217–232.
- <sup>34</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that at that time the dance programs were broadcast by European radio stations from several fashionable Restaurants where “Negro orchestras” did not play. “Negro jazz” appeared on the air later, in the 1930s (Batashev, 1972: 31).

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## Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami dviprasmiškos sovietinio džiazo situacijos aspektai. Pirmoje dalyje, remiantis Rusijos džiazo istorikų mintimis ir autorės patirtimi, pateikiami populiarūs naratyvai apie džiazo draudimą Sovietų Sąjungoje. Šių nepatikrintų populiarųjų naratyvų paplitimo tvarumas ir įtaigumas implikuoja mitines minėtos idėjos charakteristikas. Tačiau, kaip teigiama išvadose, mitai yra neatsiejama istorijos dalis, pasakojanti tai, ko niekada nepasakys sausi faktai, – apie žmogaus patirtį ir emocijas. Todėl kur kas svarbiau, kaip mitai atsiranda ir koks yra jų turinys, o ne kokia tikroji vertė. Sovietinio džiazo mitas, skelbiantis, kad sovietinio režimo sąlygomis džiazas buvo draudžiama muzika ir groti jį prilygo pasipriešinimui, yra tik vienas iš daugelio kitų mitų džiazo diskurse. Paminėtini, pavyzdžiui, pasakojimai apie džiažą kaip nepriklausomos afroamerikiečių kultūros išraišką arba apie džiažą kaip laisvės gestą. Mitas apie „sovietinį džiazo draudimą“ iš dalies kilo iš prielaidos apie populiariosios meninės raiškos opozicinį pobūdį totalitarinėse ar autoritarinėse visuomenėse, kaip teigia Klenke (2019: 55). Pagal šį „herojišką“ modelį tam tikrų muzikos veikėjų maištingi veiksmai prieš priespaudos sąlygas interpretuojami kaip moraliai pranašesni *homines politici* pavyzdžiai. Panašiai teigia ir Havas (2022: 86). Teiginius apie polinkį kurti džiažą socialistinėse šalyse kaip savo prigimtimi politinį objektą, atliekantį kontrkultūrinę funkciją, jis vadina „revoliuciniu mitu“. Meną politizuojantis diskursas buvo įtvirtintas siekiant įteisinti arba pakirsti konfliktuojančias ideologijas šaltojo karo epochoje.

Sovietinio džiazo istoriografijos apžvalga parodė požiūrių skirtumus. Sovietų autoriai, rašantys apie džiažą ir publikuojantys darbus daugiausia rusų kalba, santykinai menkai domėjosi socialiniais ir politiniais muzikos aspektais. Daugiau dėmesio jie skyrė „universalioms“ estetinėms muzikos vertybėms arba jos istoriniam vystymuisi. O Vakarų mokslininkai stebėjo sovietologijos tendencijas ir taikė sintetinį požiūrį, pabrėžiantį individualizmo veiksnio ir sovietinės valdžios vaidmenį, kai su ideologija susiję poslinkiai ir posūkiai atsispindėjo oficialiajame džiazo statuse.

Antroje straipsnio dalyje, siekiant iliustruoti su sovietiniu džiažu susijusias dilemas, grįžtama į XX a. trečiąjį dešimtmetį, kai Sovietų Sąjungoje pirmą kartą buvo atlikta džiazo muzika, o Rusijos proletarinių muzikų asociacijos (RPMA) pareiškimuose pasirodė prieš džiažą nukreipti išpuoliai. Vos tik atsiradęs Rusijoje, džiazas aptiko derlingą dirvą. NEP'o laikais valstybė rėmė naujas meno vystymosi formas. Futurizmas, tapęs valstybiniu menu, siekė revoliucionizuoti meno kalbą ir formas, centruodamasis į nuolatinį judėjimą pirmyn, dinamiškumą ir dialektinį atsinaujinimą. 1928 m. Maksimas Gorkis laikraštyje „Pravda“ paskelbė straipsnį „Storulių muzika“, kuris buvo parankus RPMA: tūždama ant džiazo, asociacija pasinaudojo šiuo straipsniu ir

pavertė jį visos sovietinio džiazio diskurso epochos pradžios simboliu. Paradoksalu, bet straipsnis, dažnai pristatomas kaip sovietinio džiazio draudimo simbolis, buvo skirtas ne džiazui, o veikiau sovietiniam gyvenimui šlovinti ir piktam puolimui prieš jo antitezę – Vakarų pasaulį, laikantis tipiškų antikarietiškos sovietinės retorikos modelių.

Antidžiazio išpuolių pradžia trečiojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje buvo tas metas, kai iškilo pasaulinės modernybės ir sovietinės ideologinės paradigmos dilema. Modernistinės futuristinės tendencijos, kurios pirmosios įrėmino džiazio atsiradimą, tuomet buvo laikomos nesuderinamomis su „proletarinės hegemonijos“ pergalės per kultūrinę revoliuciją idėjomis, įskaitant kampaniją prieš buržuazinius intelektualus, ir kultūros proletarizavimu, t. y. politizavimu

ir proletarinės valdžios perėmimu kultūros fronte (Fitzpatrick 1974).

Tačiau su džiazu susijusi polemika buvo būdinga ne vien Sovietų Sąjungai. Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose, pavyzdžiui, jis buvo suvokiamas arba kaip kvintesenciškai amerikietiškas, arba kaip pavojingai neamerikietiškas (Gusejnova 2016: 29), o Europoje džiazas buvo siejamas su susirūpinimu dėl modernybės. Mėgstančiųjų pabrėžti išskirtinį džiazio statusą Sovietų Sąjungoje (ir Rytų bloke) teiginiais prieštarauja Rüdigerio Ritterio (2019: 68) pareiškimas, kad džiazio istorijos struktūra Rytų bloke niekuo nesiskiria nuo džiazio istorijos struktūros kituose pasaulio kraštuose; skiriasi tik konkrečių sąlygų detalės.

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