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LENINGRAD DIXIELAND ENSEMBLE: Oleg Kuvaitsev, left, Anatoly Chimiris and Boris Ershov at "Turntable Junction."

Soviet jazzmen drew crowd and held it

 By SUE GILMORE
 SACRAMENTO UNION STAFF WRITER

THERE WAS neither a seat to spare nor a square foot of ground to stand on when the Soviets played Dixieland at their first Jubilee set of the day Saturday in the Firehouse Lot in Old Sacramento.

Whether it was curiosity about the first-ever Soviet band or word-of-mouth reports on their Friday performances, the Leningrad Dixieland Ensemble had no trouble drawing a bigger than capacity crowd to one of the festival's largest locations.

And once they had them, boy, did they hold them — for 35 minutes full of hot, hot jazz. Make no bones about it, these eight guys are no novelty act — you'd want to hear them even if they hailed from Peoria.

Opening without fanfare, or benefit of introduction, they played their first number with visages grim and body language on hold. But they warmed and loosened up considerably as the music flowed and the elbow-to-elbow crowd waxed ever more enthusiastic in its response.

Their second number, which is bound to become their signature tune for their American tour, was a swinging, foot-stamping version of "Midnight in Moscow." Called "Moscow Nights" when Russians Soloviv and Sedoy composed it, the tune rose to No. 2 on the charts as an instrumental here 25 years ago when

■ "HAPPY SYNCOPATORS" lift off at Levity Lounge / B10

Kenny Ball's orchestra released it, and is, apparently, a favorite on both sides of the Atlantic.

If it sagged a little when they played it at their just-off-the-plane press conference on Thursday, it must have been because they'd been up until midnight in Moscow the night before. By Saturday, they had it down to a tight, precise and rollicking rendition of a song a lot of Americans have associated with their country for a long time.

While there is not a weak player in the entire lineup, bandleader-saxophonist Oleg Kuvaitsev, also the only band member to speak any English, emerged as the clear claimant to the title of wickedest jazz instrumentalist. Strong, self-assured and smooth even when the notes were flying at a furious pace, he played without any evidence of having to come up for air.

Alexander Usyskin, looking as laconic and cool as "Dragnet's" Jack Webb in his buzz haircut and sunshades, was another band standout, with his silky-sounding clarinet. Horn player Vladimir Voronin was equally adept on trumpet and flugelhorn, which he played on its side without any flattening of sound.

One suspects the real character in the crowd,

however, is banjoist Boris Ershov, who comes alive only when it's his turn to solo, stomping his foot and bugging his eyes out in self-mocking comic abandon. Is it that huge circular backboard his instrument is mounted on that amplifies his efforts, or just his musclebound approach to playing? Whatever accounts for it, the sound he produces is much beefier than the plink-plink stuff we are used to from most banjoists.

While the guys speak next to no English, they don't hesitate to sing it — much to the delight of Saturday's crowd. Kuvaitsev and Voronin got a huge round of applause when they burst into a single chorus in English on one number, even though nobody could make head or tail of the lyrics.

But it was drummer Alexander Skrypnik's incredibly good imitation of Louis Armstrong's rasp that brought the house down. Skrypnik growled out "Hello, Dolly" in English diction every bit as garbled as Armstrong's always was — a faithful rendition indeed. When it was all over but the shouting, Skrypnik leaped to his feet, face beaming and arms outspread, to acknowledge his applause.

If you're lucky today, you can squeeze into the Cal Expo Beer Garden at 4 p.m. or New Turntable Junction at 8 p.m. to hear the Leningrad Dixieland Ensemble play. On Monday, they perform at 11:45 a.m. in the Firehouse Lot and at 2:15 p.m. at 4th and Jazz.