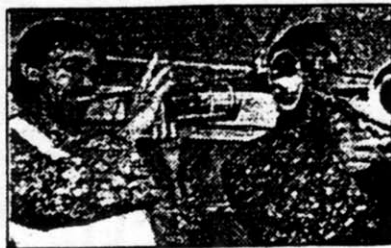


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Soviets take fest by storm

Showcase, B1

Leningrad Dixieland Ensemble joins the jubilee

By HOLLY JOHNSON
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LOOKING A LITTLE tired from a 20-hour flight, but playing as smoothly as though they just had rehearsed, musicians from the Leningrad Dixieland Ensemble gave their premiere performance on American soil Thursday afternoon in Old Sacramento.

During an informal press conference under a big blue-and-gold tent, the eight members of Russia's oldest traditional jazz group tooted, strummed and even kicked up their heels while playing the fast-paced "Royal Garden Blues" and "Midnight in Moscow." A slipped bridge on the bass fiddle cut the last piece short, but that didn't bother a gathering crowd of about 80 people, who clapped and whistled in appreciation.

The group was supposed to have arrived in Sacramento at midnight last night and get a good night's rest before its busy schedule of 12 performances with the 14th annual Dixieland Jubilee this weekend. But due to a flight delay in Chicago, the musicians did not arrive until Thursday afternoon, according to Jeanne Small, publicity coordinator for the festival.

Wearing white T-shirts with blue horn-shaped insignias, the musicians, whose ages range from 50 to 28, smoked Russian cigarettes after the performance and packed away their instruments.

"It's a very beautiful country. We are very excited to be here," said Oleg Kuvaitsev, 37, the group's leader and saxophone player who spoke in halting English. Part of his speech was translated by Sacramento writer John Lewis. Kuvaitsev explained that the group wouldn't have a lot of time to tour the country, as they will be playing every day of their 16-day tour of the United States, which includes visits to Kansas City, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Las Vegas and New York.

When asked what he was most looking forward to doing in the U.S., Kuvaitsev responded "to play well."

Translated by Lewis, he added that "all different festivals have one essential goal — that we be in unison and that we feel like one people.

"And music helps us do this. More than any other, Dixieland, because it seems to be the most democratic. This music focuses everything."

The ensemble is the first Russian group to play in the annual Sacramento festival, which includes jazz combos from Poland, Hungary, England, Denmark, Holland and Sweden, according to festival official William Gunther.

"It's taken us approximately four years to get these guys over here," said Mike McCombe, international band coordinator for the festival. He explained round-about steps he took to trace the group, which he first heard about from the Jazz Band Ball Orchestra of Poland. After finding its whereabouts through Wyoming booking agent Don Ballard, he finally formally requested permission from a Russian minister of culture for them to come to America, who responded, "'of course, they can come. We'd like them to come,'" said McCombe.

The eight musicians, Kuvaitsev said, perform professionally throughout the Soviet Union, and also tour to such countries as Bulgaria, Poland and Sweden. He said they had heard of the Sacramento Dixieland Jubilee four years ago. He added that there are similar jazz festivals in Russia, with about 12 to 15 bands per event and "many jazz groups in the U.S.S.R., maybe 25."

The Leningrad band will travel to San Francisco and Los Angeles for one-night stops in each city and wind up their tour in Washington D.C. on June 14.

"What do you think of all these people standing in front of you?" a reporter asked Kuvaitsev.

"No problem," he answered with a smile.