

FROM RUSSIA WITH JAZZ: VALERY PONOMAREV (1998)

“**W**hen I hear jazz, it’s as if I had gas on the stomach,” Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev declared in December 1963. His remark, as revealing as it was vulgar, summed up the official Soviet line on that “Western decadence” called jazz. Moscow-born trumpeter Valery Ponomarev grew up in the midst of this unenlightened, stifling environment. But, inspired by the sounds he heard over the Voice of America and the few records he could acquire on the black market, Ponomarev found himself irresistibly drawn to this music. He craved the life of a jazz musician, so through somewhat unsanctioned and rather risky methods he left the Soviet Union.

At the end of 1973 Ponomarev arrived in New York, and his life in jazz truly began when, at last, he got to sit in with his hero, Art Blakey. In 1977 he joined Blakey’s *Jazz Messengers* and worked under the master drummer for nearly four years. Since leaving Blakey, Ponomarev has performed around the world as a sideman and as the leader of his own group, *Universal Language*.

Did you begin music on the trumpet?

No, I actually banged on the piano as a kid a little bit. My mother is a pretty good amateur piano player, and also she comes from a very musical family. Her mother, my grandmother, was a singer in the Bolshoi Theater, in the choir. My mother used to tell me, when she was very little, the most famous Russian divas would be hanging out in the house, and she would be playing on the floor with her toys.

We also had, I’ll always remember, beautifully printed editions of operas and symphonies, and they were all stacked in the top drawer of the wardrobe. And every once in a while I would climb up there and look at them, and they looked beautiful with all those staves of music.

But anyway, as I say, my mother knew classical music extremely well. She recognizes pieces by the first couple of bars. She would tell you right away what it is. And any time there was a sort of trivia competition on the radio, or anywhere for that matter, she would be always win. Anything there is, whatever question about classical music, she would identify everything immediately. And I thought that was a normal thing.

So how did you get to the trumpet?

Well, like I say, I was always attracted to music, and in the kid’s summer camp we had a designated signal-giver. How do you call that?

Like a bugler?

Right, right. The guy who gives the signals. Actually we had beautiful fanfares. I was six, and I was totally blown away by that sound and by that fanfare. And that horn was like a magic, sacred, shining thing. Nobody was supposed to touch it.

But I talked the guy into it. He let me try it, and soon I became a signal-giver in the camp and proved to be pretty good at it. All of the neighboring villages knew the time of whatever activities there were in the camp, and I became a “celebrity,” of sorts. Everybody in the radius of many miles knew me ‘cause they would eventually come to the camp and would always ask, “Who’s blowing that fanfare? Who’s giving the signals?” “That little redhead.”

I didn’t realize that, by standards of 200 years ago, I was actually playing natural trumpet. That’s how trumpet evolved. It evolved from bugles, from post horns, and so on. It is natural trumpet. It has all the natural tones in there. Valves, which were invented later, they just alter those sounds.

Years later when I was in architectural college – fourteen or thirteen at the time – there was a student band and I heard the band rehearsing. I, of course, snuck in the room and hung out there, and they didn’t have a drummer. And you know how kids are. “There’s no drummer. Can I play the drums?” They said, “Yeah, OK. Go ahead, try.” They didn’t even ask me if I had experience or not. I just sat behind the drums and started banging pretty much in time. They said, “OK, you’re in the band.” So I ended up playing drums in the band.

A couple of rehearsals down the road – and that scene is always in front of my eyes, I remember it very vividly – I’m sitting behind the drum set, and trumpet section is over here and the band director is further there, and one of the trumpet players put his horn down in between tunes or something, or he was looking for the music. So first thing I did, I just grabbed the horn and started playing.

That moment will always stand in my mind, of course, because everybody stopped doing whatever they were doing, and they turned their heads at me. Those trumpet players were very good. They had beautiful tones themselves, but that was a very different sound. They all turned around like, “That’s you?” I said, “Yeah.” The band director said, “See me after rehearsal. I’ll give you a trumpet You’ll be learning to play trumpet.”

So you weren’t actually studying music at that time.

No, I was not a musician at all. Actually I just finished in art school. They kept moving me through all the courses very quick. So I was

supposed to graduate at the age of sixteen, but I graduated from art school at fourteen. And that's how I got into architectural college. Actually I was supposed to go to, like, an elite art school. But you could not go there until after sixteen and I was fourteen, so I went to architectural college on my merit of being an artist. But music, no, I didn't study at all. I heard a lot at home but couldn't even write a note if you asked me to. I wouldn't know how to do it. But I started then, in architectural college.

Did you transfer to a music school at that point?

No, no. I stayed in architectural college, but, you know, there were a couple things going on. For example, the next week I went to the brass band rehearsal where our music director also was the director, and he gave me a horn. Now I would be surprised – then I was not surprised. To a kid, whatever comes, that's it. That's the way it is. There's drums, you need a drummer. "OK, I'll play drums." Who knows that I cannot play drums? And to them I sounded pretty good.

The same with the trumpet. He said, "OK, we're playing a concert today. You play." If you'd tell me now, I'd know that there's some shaky business going on. But then I didn't. I was a trumpet player – I was supposed to play. So I grabbed a trumpet. There was another trumpet player playing, and he said, "Watch that guy."

So I was watching him, what to do, and he kept showing me things on the music staff, which I didn't know what they were. I just watched him finger and I fingered the same, and everything was coming out. What really happened, I realized later, was there were three trumpet players missing, and to get paid, the band director had to show up with some musicians, otherwise there would have been a problem. So he put me in there to sit, not to play. But I thought I was supposed to play, and I did play. Then he started teaching me, started showing me things, and I made very quick progress. He gave me my own horn, I was practicing at home, but all of it was still like an immature business really. It was just like a toy.

My mother worked at the Tass [news] agency, and they had a band for the workers of the agency, and it was very good, very experienced, with a very well educated bandleader. My mother found out that they needed a drummer. So I went there and said, "Well, I'm a drummer." The bandleader goes, "OK, let's try it." This time nobody could tell me I'm not a drummer 'cause I'd already played with a band. I sat in with the band, and he said, "Yeah, all right."

The leader was a trumpet player, and I told him, "Listen, I can play that." He says, "What do you mean?" "Well, I play trumpet," I say, "a little." He goes, "How little? What's your high range?" I said, "Well, I can

hit E-flat, third octave.” He says, “Show it to me. Prove it to me.”

So he gave me a horn and I played it. He says, “All right, you’ll play trumpet.” And then he realized I hadn’t any kind of experience. I just could hit those notes, but I couldn’t read or didn’t even know what’s what. But he was also teaching music and trumpet players, and he had a band of his own, a brass band with kids of my age. So I studied with him and started practicing seriously, and in a year from that point, I quit architectural college and went to music college. And the music college I quit a year or two years later. I was already approaching eighteen years of age, and by that time I heard jazz music and there was no more time for classical music.

How did you get to hear jazz? After all, in the Soviet Union jazz was not readily available.

No, not at all. Well, like I say, I was already practicing trumpet under the direction of a very experienced teacher and learning a lot, and was also playing my first professional gigs in a dance band. I was, like, seventeen or something and was playing real paid gigs, the equivalent of today’s discotheques.

And a friend of mine at one gig told me, “Valery, I recorded something off the radio yesterday I’m sure you would absolutely love. Come to my house tomorrow. I’ll play it for you.” Also that day I remember like it was happening right now. I took a subway. I got out and went to his house. I walked into his apartment, and there he is sitting by the tape recorder, and he didn’t even say hello or welcome, nothing. He just pushed the button of his tape recorder and out came the sounds of Clifford Brown, “Blues Walk,” and it was a total revelation. That was it. That’s what I wanted to do. That was me. Nothing else mattered. And it’s still the same way.

That beauty, that perfectness, that excitement, strength, confidence, it totally absorbed me. I had to learn to play like that. And I started calling everybody who called themselves jazz musicians, and I asked them anything I could find out. Some people had tapes, jazz recorded over the radio or even off records. There were some black market records circulated. And the first record I got was Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, with Lee Morgan, playing “Moanin’.” That was it!

There was nothing else I could think about, just that. First thing, I’d wake up in the morning, I’d push the tape recorder button and out comes [*he sings the opening phrase to “Moanin’”*]. Incredible. So very soon I learned all the solos by memory.

There is some quality to that record. Later, after learning and listening to many, many records, tons of records, I realized that this



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record is really special. It has in it everything about jazz, from Dixieland through nowadays. (It was made in '58.) It's really like the essence, quintessence, of jazz music. It embraces so much of rhythm, of beauty, of form, of command of instruments, of composition, of execution. It's just the total example of jazz music. If you asked me what to send to outer

space as an example of jazz music, I would send that record and that would be it. And they would figure out the rest.

Was it difficult to develop as a jazz musician under those circumstances? How did you learn about things like chord changes and improvisation?

You see, I was totally absorbed by the music. I absolutely forgot any other activities that I was involved in. I'm a good soccer player. That was totally forgotten right away. Hanging out with friends on the street. Everything's forgotten. Music college, forgotten. But I had been to the college already by that time for two years, and I acquired a good knowledge of solfeggio – not perfect, but sufficient. It was enough for me to work with and keep on growing from that point.

One of the more experienced older guys told me, "Write it down, those solos. See what you get out of it." Writing down solos is incredible experience. When you write it down, so much opens to you that I literally got hooked on it. I was sitting and transcribing and transcribing, day in and day out. I can show you tons of books of transcriptions.

Transcribing by yourself is the absolute best way of learning, and I always recommend it to students. When you transcribe, you apply your mind in three dimensions: visual, audio, and mechanical. You absorb knowledge in these three ways, and that's the deepest, strongest impression on your mind. And this way you really get the idea. So I write, I see, I execute. And it really gets settled in your mind in all those ways, applied to rhythm, applied to chords, applied to your instrument, and so on and so forth. So you can't miss, really.

I got so hooked on transcribing because I was learning so much out of it. Whenever I would come across some musical problem, I'd just open up my book and I'd learn from there what it is. And this way I actually went through theory much quicker than if I had kept studying at the college. Those guys in the college, they kept on learning some stuff that, even after college, was still not enough to deal with jazz. Over here I was dealing directly with chords, melodies derived out of chords, so on and so forth. It was right there at my fingertips. Before even I knew it, I learned to speak the language.

From that point I was more and more comfortable with changes. I tell students, "You got to learn to a point where you don't think." When you play, it's too late to think. There's a bar coming on, but you can't think of it like, "OK, this chord is derived from that scale, and this is an altered step, and what do I do with it?" It's too late already, because even if it's at a slow tempo, it still passes by so quick. If you think of what to do with it, it's gone. It's too late. So I know exactly what I'll be doing a

few bars ahead, sometimes eight bars ahead. And when the bar comes, it's a palette for me to paint something on.

So I kept on studying, and I was invited to play at this club, Youth Café it was called. A very good trio was playing there of much older musicians. They were the best musicians of the Soviet Union at that time. By Russian standards they were really very good, considering that they have no chance to meet with musicians in the West at all. I'm still a kid, nineteen years of age, maybe twenty at the most.

I was playing in a very hip place, by those standards, and a lot of foreigners used to come. Actually regular citizens of Russia had trouble getting in. That was the place where the Soviet authorities used to bring foreign tourists to show them, "Look, we have everything. We have a free society. Don't think of us as a strict, closed society where everything is forbidden. We have everything" – *sort of*. It was a show-off place.

I remember there was a group of American tourists, very young people, maybe college students or something. And we played and their leader, who was with them, jumped up to me and he kept on talking to me, so excited. So of course, the interpreter showed up right away and explained to me, "He loved your playing. He said you sound like Clifford Brown. He wants to send you records. Give him your address."

No way, man! You can't give your address because you'd be in trouble. You'd be on the suspicion list. To me, the gig was the center of my life, and I would lose a lot if I was fired from that job. In a way it was not really a job at all. It was, like, three nights a week we played there, and the salary was nothing to talk about. But to me it was the whole world, that gig.

And to get on the KGB's suspicion list, to communicate with foreigners – and not just any foreigners, but a United States citizen – boy, it's big trouble. So I said what I was expected to say. "No, no. Thank you," almost like making him believe I have everything over here I need. And I was *dying* for the records, which I did get on the black market anyway, some of them.

But most music I got was from the Voice of America program by Willis Conover, who passed recently. Willis Conover was one great man. He introduced the whole world to American jazz music as much as, maybe, Art Blakey and Duke Ellington, 'cause he was playing on his programs the best, the real, true jazz music. When he died, there was a huge concert dedicated in his memory in Washington. I played that concert, which was transmitted all over the world, everywhere – except the United States. His programs were never heard here, and nobody knew him.

I mean, some people knew him and know how much he really did for jazz music, but in the foreign countries literally everybody knew him. Willis Conover was extremely well respected, a very important personality. And on his programs you would hear everything. It would be Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Art Blakey, Horace Silver, the Jazztet with Benny Golson and Art Farmer. It was an incredible introduction to jazz music, and you could record it off the radio.

And that way I recorded, as did many other people in Moscow, a lot, a lot of music. I had tons of tapes. Records, of course, not. But on the black market I was very fortunate to get Clifford Brown, *A Study in Brown*. I will always remember, a friend called me and said, "Valery, remember you asked me to get you *A Study in Brown*?" 'cause his father was a diplomat or something and went abroad and brought this LP back with him. So this guy sold it to me for a fortune – my monthly salary, man – which I didn't care at all.

When did you begin thinking about coming to the United States?

Not that I was thinking of it, but it's like what I experienced later when I was studying English and talking to other people who were studying foreign languages. First thing when you start studying a foreign language, you want to associate, communicate, with people from that environment, from that country, who speak that language.

And so it was a natural pull. I wanted to communicate. I wanted to speak this language [of jazz] to people who do speak it. But there was no way to go on a tourist visa to the United States then. It was absolutely impossible. I mean, even if you just voiced your desire to go, you'd be in trouble already, if not in jail. But if you don't end up in jail, you'll end up in a lot of troubles just by saying, "I want to go to New York for a month."

But anyway, opportunity did present itself, very real, very concrete, in early '73. It was the real deal, so to speak, and I took advantage of the opportunity and I escaped from Russia.

How did you accomplish it?

At the time there was very strong immigration of Russian Jews out of Russia, and it was influenced by the West somehow. One way or the other Russian Jews were getting out of Russia on a steady basis. And a lot of them were musicians, a lot of them were my friends. I told them, "Take me with you."

And then, all of a sudden one guy, a good friend of mine, said, "Valery, you can do it." I said, "Even though I am a Russian national, I still can do it?" He said, "Yeah. We'll arrange for you a fake invitation, and the authorities will take it. Don't worry about it." I said, "Are you

sure they won't put me into jail or anything?" He said, "No, because it's international business." He was talking to all his advisors there, and they had knowledgeable people who really knew what was going on. And he said, "Man, I spoke with this guy, with that one, don't even worry. You're 100 percent out of here. If you get that official invitation, they have to honor it. That's it."

So I trusted my friend. Why not? I had to go see "the Wizard of Oz," man, which is Art Blakey, of course. I just had to go there. Just like with the drums, just like with grabbing the trumpet from another trumpet player, I just did it.

But at one point I realized it was extremely dangerous. When I was presenting my papers at the immigration office in Moscow, the officer was looking through my papers – a female officer with shoulders bigger than the two of us put together sitting there in her KGB uniform. She actually was very smart and, in a way, even friendly, but a lot depended on her. And she said, "So now you're a Russian national, and you tell me you have relatives in Israel," which, of course, I didn't. And then I really felt how dangerous it was. From that point I could have been in jail right away and could have been sent to labor camps.

That was real serious. But according to my friend and the people he consulted with, it was no big deal. You can lie and it still goes through because nobody wanted to make an international scene because of some musician.

Anyway, that was my fake story, comma, next page. She turned the page and read through my fake story of how my relatives got to live in Israel and all that, and she goes, "That's good." It was amazing – "*That's good.*" I was practically with both feet in hell. I was practically already taken away and thrown into the dungeon. But I realized I passed the critical point. I was OK. When she said that, little by little life came back to me. My blood started moving again. I don't know how long it took, but I started to feel normal pretty soon.

I left there with total conviction that it worked, that I'll be all right. I waited for about a month, maybe two at the most, and permission was granted. I got the fake visa I was not eligible for. I had to pay for it actually, 800 rubles, which was a big sum of money for me, for anybody. At that time, a dollar was worth sixty-seven Russian kopeks, which was like a cent. But anyway, I paid that money and I got rid of my Soviet citizenship and I finally did take a plane to the West.

First I went to Vienna, Austria. In Vienna word came from other refugees that Italian musicians knew me and would give me a gig if I ended up there. So a week later, after hanging out in Vienna, I was on a

train on my way to Italy, where I stayed for two months, playing jazz. Then I left for New York.

Were you able to find gigs in New York right away?

Actually I did. I played a gig for \$20 a night almost the second week of my being here. It was club called Churchill's on 83rd Street and, I think, Second Avenue. The great baritone player Harold Cumberbatch was playing there and Matthew Gee, the trombone player who worked at one time with Duke Ellington.

I came there and I heard those guys play, and they played down-to-earth, that healthy, strong, optimistic jazz. I absolutely loved it. The language was really mine. That's what I wanted to talk about, to speak, that language. So I asked the guys if I could sit in and judging from my awkward looks – I was dressed funny and didn't speak English very well – they said, "OK, wait until the end of the set." But when they heard me play, they got so excited, Matthew Gee and Harold, both of them, "Man, you're one of the guys!" I said, "What's that mean, 'one of the guys?'" "One of us. Just like us."

So from that point on I was always sitting in with these guys, and Matthew Gee was calling me for gigs always. But those were, like, little \$20 gigs. One day he calls me, "Valery, come play piano with me. I don't have a piano player." I, of course, took my trumpet anyway, but I came there and played piano. Then I asked him, "How did you know I play piano?" He said, "The way you play solos, I know you have to play piano." He didn't even ask me if I played piano or not. He just said, "Come play piano."

So how did you finally meet Art Blakey?

It happened a couple of months after I arrived in the United States. It was early '74, January or maybe February. I arrived in New York late '73, and I was, of course, like a kid in a candy land. I was in the Village, I was in Harlem always. I was meeting musicians left and right, Horace Silver, Sonny Rollins.

Anyway, I met a lot of people, musician after musician, except Art Blakey. Art Blakey was out of town. But then finally I heard that Art Blakey was playing at the Five Spot, and I went there and I met Art Blakey in person. Here for the first time I saw this man sitting behind the drums, and right after that somebody introduced me to him. A guy in the audience recognized me, and I was standing right by Art Blakey, looking at him. And he goes, "Art, Art, look at this guy. He's from Moscow. He's down-to-earth, true Russian guy, plays like Clifford Brown."

And what did Art Blakey say?

"What? Who are you?" I said, "Well, I'm trumpet player from

Russia.” He goes, “Where’s your trumpet?” First thing he said. “Where’s your trumpet?” So I came next day with the trumpet, and he let me sit in. As he often did at the end of his performance, he would let somebody sit in on the theme song, and he let another drummer – I think it was Jim Lovelace – sit in, too. I was kind of disappointed that I didn’t have a chance to play with Art, but OK, I was already there.

And right in the middle of my solo, all of a sudden I heard the drums changing. I heard that unmistakable sound which was coming out from my tape recorder. I turned around and it was Art Blakey! He heard me play, and he said to Jim Lovelace, “Let me play.” And he got behind the drums and started playing. Yeah, that was incredible. So I kept on playing. I was speaking my language with somebody who speaks it so well. I heard him responding to what I was doing. I heard him initiating my solo lines. It was just total communication.

That was the last number, supposedly. And he extended the performance. He featured me on a ballad right away, then we played another tune after that. And after all that he just hugged me. I couldn’t break away from him. You know, he plays drums for real. It’s like athletic exercise, and he was, like, all in sweat, and with his sweaty shirt he grabbed me. He hugged me hard and kept on telling me, “You’ll be playing in my band. You’ll be playing in my band.” And [trumpeter] Bill Hardman was then in the band, and he was sitting in the audience when I was playing, and he said, “Valery, he was so happy. He was so stunned when you played. He just loved you.”

And I know that was what happened because Art Blakey, he just didn’t let me go. A big crowd gathered around us right away. And one guy, I think it was [saxophonist] Mitch Frohman, he was like, “He plays with me sometimes.” And Art goes, “He won’t play with you for too long, kiddo. He’ll be playing with *me*.”

That was my daddy, Art Blakey, which I realized later when [in 1977] I joined Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. It’s like a family. Art Blakey used to tell us very often, [saxophonists] Bobby Watson and David Schnitter, and [bassist] Dennis Irwin and all of us in the band, he said, “You didn’t just join the band. You joined the family of the Jazz Messengers. All of the predecessors and all of them who will follow in your steps, we’re all one family.” To me, there is nothing higher than playing with Art Blakey. So I became a member of the family.

Did it seem incredible for you, after listening to his music in Russia all those years, to be right there playing with Art Blakey?

Actually when I came to America, the first time I saw New York, it didn’t shock me. I mean, I was extremely happy to see all these lights

and skyscrapers and highways and all that when we were driving from Kennedy Airport up to Manhattan. But I was excited because I saw what I more or less expected to see. That's where I was going. You know, you wanted it and you're there and it's exactly what you wanted. That's how I felt.

The same with Art Blakey. When I sat in with him and played with him, I felt that was my place, that's where I belong. That's what I'm living for. I didn't feel it was, like, totally incredible. I thought, actually, it was very natural. And I was accepted into the family where I belonged anyway.

Art Blakey said it later, when I was already in the band. He said, "You were a Messenger long before you actually joined the Messengers." And I felt that way. He knew who to have in the band, how to make everybody function right and to bring the best out of you for the overall best result of the sound of the band. And his saying was always, "There's no stars in the band. The band is the star. The Jazz Messengers is the star."

Why don't you talk a bit about what you've done since leaving the Jazz Messengers?

When I left Art Blakey [in 1980], I was thinking of starting my own band, and there was never a question of how to name my band. The name was there always. It's "Universal Language," which I consider jazz music. It appeals to everybody around the world regardless of history, regardless of geography, or their social way of living. Jazz music appeals to people and people understand it. It is almost like spoken language, and it's loved and respected and studied and researched all over the world. So to me, that's what jazz music is. It's universal language.

And I keep traveling to foreign countries with other bands, particularly [pianist] Walter Bishop, Jr. It is a great jewel in my career, let's say, to be able to work with Walter, who worked with Charlie Parker. I have a sense that I'm in the same atmosphere with Charlie Parker, with all the geniuses who created this music then. I really feel in the same musical ocean with them, playing with Walter, listening to him play, listening to him treating changes and rhythms and melody lines. It's like authentic, absolutely true language.

But mostly I work as, let's say, a guest musician, anywhere in European countries. I have certain musicians I work with in every country, and they've become sort of my band. So in a way I have many Universal Languages around the world, in Spain, in London, in Germany, in Italy, and so on. These are musicians who like my playing, they like my music, and it's very comfortable for me to deal with them. So it's

not really a pick-up band.

How many times have you been back to Russia?

December [1997] will be my third time in twenty-four years, now. The tour starts in Moscow for one concert and a clinic and a radio show, all fit in one day. Then we go to St. Petersburg and we also go to Siberia, my friend – in December! And I'm going with Benny Golson. Benny Golson is my hero almost as much as Lee Morgan or Clifford Brown, or maybe even Art Blakey. He wrote so much beautiful music, and the more I listen to Benny Golson, the more I realize what an incredible not only writer, but instrumentalist, he is.

What changes have you seen in the situation of jazz and jazz musicians since the breakup of the Soviet Union?

Well, Russia was always rich with talent, but lack of communication made its mark, of course. There always were very talented people there, but now they have more contact, and I think very soon we'll see real giants coming out of there. I met some new musicians who are very young, they were barely born when I left, playing seriously, playing for real. They could create a stir over here, too.

Are there more places, more clubs, now in Russia where you can go and hear jazz?

I don't think so, not that many, because the country is still in turmoil. But the music will find its way to anyplace, wherever. It's like some agent which always gets through.

Well, if it could get through during the time you were there, it can do it now.

Right. Of course, it's much more available now. And there's even schools there now where people can go and learn. So I see a very bright future for jazz in Russia.