

**The Fifteenth Annual Blues Festival - Russian Blues Tour:**

From the Ground Up and Back

October 26 to November 10<sup>th</sup> 2004

I left American soil on October 26, 2004 to perform at the Fifteenth Annual Blues Festival-Russian Tour, in the primary country of the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation. I kept a journal and took some four hundred digital photographs. Although my camera went on the fritz, I learn that when the battery power weakens it affects the camera's ability to focus quickly, and when there is not enough existing light, the camera cannot focus sharply even with the use of the flash. Also, that the camera's memory card depreciates after so many uses. In my case there is a green tinge on all pictures where I used a flash or where there was florescent lighting. Oh, yes getting back to the trip.

Recounting this trip will be easy for years to come. Blues in Russia is a two way street. It is about what they already have and what we were bringing. Many Blacks have surrendered claim to blues music and now it has become world music with more emphasis on performance than culture and enjoyed by fans worldwide. I was intrigued and excited at the prospect of going on tour in Asia. The prospect was irresistible despite the current political climate, terrorism, and my nervousness as a flyer and the upcoming National election.

As a reward for overruling my anxieties I was besieged with wonderment, and treated to a *once-in-a-lifetime* experience. I was happy and humbled simultaneously. I traveled in cities where few if any American blues musicians have traveled and performed live blues music to many first time listeners. I will always remember where I was and what I saw in Russia. I was overwhelmed at the historical sites in Russia, the monuments, architecture and the people who stand strong and remain a living testimony to the country's rich history. I learned first hand that the Russian people are as wonderful as we are. Some fifteen years into their democracy, they seem passionate in their love of freedom especially among their youth. They also love the Blues as well as Jazz and Rock and Roll.

We performed to *sold out* crowds. I opened each concert and played before the largest crowds under one roof (1,500 to 6,000) in my career. They were eager, enthusiastic and under thirty-five. Little Charlie and the Night Cats along with Mighty Sam McClain (the headliner) rounded out this group of fine musicians and road dogs.

The booking agency's staff as well as the promoter's staff was magnificent. In all of my experiences they have set the gold standard for professionalism and efficiency in organizing and facilitating a tour. We had the best accommodations available and were able to move in and out of cities and airports with relative ease.

After bouncing from O'Hare airport to New York's JFK International airport where Burger King's *meals* are in the six and seven dollar range, some eight hours and about ten time zones later this motley crew of musicians met at the Moscow airport where the Russian tour began to unfold.

## Wednesday October 27<sup>th</sup>

All of the musicians seemed to gravitate towards each other as we deplaned and headed for *Russian Customs*, there was a passport check, then on to baggage claim where the odd shaped instrument cases began to expose their owners. I always thought Rick Estrin was Lil' Charlie of the Lil' Charlie and the Nightcats but he's the other guy. When I saw the only other black musician I figured that that must be Mighty Sam McClain.

This *no nonsense-cut the small talk-this ain't customer service*, passport/Customs lady only spoke Russian and scolded me for having my passport in a passport wallet that I wore around my neck. The passport for foreign visitors is more important than your wallet or purse. It is the *Holy Grail* to accessibility. It was the key to getting anything, getting around and going home. From the hotel front desk to any of the currency exchanges, your passport and whatever is written on those stapled papers attached to it must be presented on demand for identification if you wish to enter certain buildings or continue to walk the streets.

Military uniforms were everywhere. The government takes security seriously especially after *their* 911 when a terrorist attacked the Beslan Elementary school in the Russian Republic of North Osstien which left close to 340 hostages dead, many of them children. I felt watched all the time. Even in my hotel room. I would look at the smoke alarm and other gadgets on the ceiling and wondered where the cameras were hidden. I would subsequently discover while on this tour that I had been seeded with distrust as a child while watching Rocky and Bullwinkle on television.

The tour staff was waiting for us to clear Customs with a warm bus. After the usual introductions, the tour staff counted heads and off we went to begin a blues odyssey halfway around the world. Our first stop was The Golden Ring Hotel located in the center of Moscow. It was around noon. We met traffic jams that lasted until we arrived at the hotel. This is the norm in this densely populated city of 11 million people. Ninety-nine percent of the urban dwellers live in apartment buildings. Very large apartment buildings I might add. There is nowhere to park your car. Cars are parked in yards and on the sidewalks, wherever there is available space. The day was drab and overcast and misting a light rain. Weather-wise, except for one day in the city of Rostov On Don the skies above were gray. *There were no gettin' 'free vitamin D in these h'yeah' parts.*

The Golden Ring Hotel was five stars and very secure. All Russian hotels collect passports upon registration and hold them for at least one hour. Near the elevator was a *no nonsense-cut the small talk-this ain't customer service*, plain-clothes security man. He had menacing beady eyes and made it a point to give me the *once over* at every passing. Your room key was your passport inside the hotel. You needed to have your room key (digital card) to eat, ride the elevator and operate the electricity in your room. The sophisticated lobby was designed with *marble and mirrors* and the gift shop and other high-end stores and restaurants, enhanced the atmosphere of this well-feathered resting place. I began right away learning how to convert U.S dollars into Russian Rubles. 100 Rubles is about 3 bucks.

## Wednesday October 27<sup>th</sup>

My suite was elegant and very comfortable with a sitting room, bath and shower, a *bidet* (how neat is that?) and heated pipes to warm the bath towels plus an emergency pull-rope to alert downstairs in case you *fall and cant get up*. Our tour group was scattered about all the hotel floors. The hotel service was excellent.

On our first night we ate at an Italian restaurant. The food was great. However, I was, curious about Russian cuisine. Plus, I could eat Italian anytime at home. I would live to regret this impatient remark.

After dinner I was scheduled to go on Moscow television for an interview with an interpreter (I have the video tape). The studio was in an old government building with armed military police. The traffic was in rush-hour status even though it was 8:30 P.M. New York's automobile traffic takes a backseat to Moscow. The sight of the military and their automatic weaponry was intimidating I was searched and taken to make-up room. I was then whisked into a modern studio and completed the interview. I plugged the upcoming 3 shows and answered a few question about blues music.

The breakfast buffets were great. During my normal workday schedule I usually forego breakfast. However, to maintain a high energy level I got into the habit of eating whenever it was "bean time". Anything you wanted for breakfast was served, and things you did not want like raw oriental dishes. In the center of the dining area was a Harpist dressed in an evening gown playing music to go with our breakfast. The omelets were made to order. The Harpist played some American tunes for us. The eggs were so yellow they looked orange. I wondered where the delicious fresh fruit came from. I enjoyed these midget sized pancakes with maple syrup. The coffee was trucker driver tested, angry and strong. Do not let the size of the coffee cup fool you. If the cup looks like it came from a doll set, run! It is coffee high in caffeine. I was so wired I cleaned up my room and made the bed.

## Thursday October 28<sup>th</sup>

Still jet-lagged from our arrival, we all had afternoon sound check schedules at the venues. Mighty Sam McClain and his six-piece band went first and I was last. This would be the only venue that did not sell out completely due in part because it was a Thursday night, but man was it packed! Most of these venues were sports theaters for basketball or hockey games. They were operated by government and secured by uniformed military security. This was fine with me remembering another terrorist attack at a Moscow theater where Chechen terrorists seized some 700 hostages. Russian Special Forces launched a commando raid, pumping an aerosol form of the powerful narcotic Fentanyl into the theater to disable the hostage-takers. The drug killed more than 110 hostages, as well as many of their captors

## Thursday October 28<sup>th</sup>

Following the sound check at each venue we held a press conference before the local entertainment media. We had at least two translators at each conference. One of the primary sponsors of the Fifteenth Annual Blues Festival was Efes Pilsner Beer. The Efes PR staff was on hand that new how to get things done. Our table and background set was decorated with their corporate logo and beer. I found that the Efes beer goes down well and is satisfying.

A great deal of the questions posed at the press conference was regarding the definitions of the blues. The *DNA* if you will of the blues. Although we gave out fundamental definitions, e.g. the blues are the *facts of life* expressed musically, I told them that anymore critical information was a secret and an enigma and referred them to page 231 Paragraph 3 of W.C. Handy's autobiography. They seem to be where we were in our musical development some thirty years ago in the U.S. I figured that *our* father, William Christopher Handy's response was adequate.

The blues fans were terrific and for the most part were under thirty-five, middle class and intellectual. They were hungry for the music pictures, autographs and the blues. They generated so much excitement and electricity and love. We all had a ball.

## Friday October 29<sup>th</sup>

Today was pretty much the same as yesterday. I was running on about five hours sleep and adrenalin. Since show time was 7 P.M., that morning we went either sightseeing or souvenir hunting. A group of us went to the Red Square where the Kremlin sits in its full magnificence. I visited the massive red walls, Lenin's Tomb, The St. Basils Cathedral, an 850-year-old religious monument in its splendor and antiquity sits in the Red Square. Seeing this unique religious structure in real life was a thrill for a history buff like me. They allowed limited access touring in side the church. The church minarets and the domes remind me of scoops of ice cream with sprinkles. The church design looks like something out of Treasure Island or a Rudyard Kipling novel. It is an amazing piece of architecture. Again, It is 850 years old. It was overwhelming to behold. It held lots of art and opulence. I marveled at the buildings construction and the low doorways. I assumed people were shorter in height.

Other tourists and onlookers were curious about us as we gathered in front of Lenin tomb. They sensed we were Americans. We were loose, laughing and eager to crack jokes. The general posture of many of the people there was serious, subdued and quiet with plenty of eye contact. Many facial expressions were dead serious to morose and stale. This made me sad even though the *cavalry* was now in town. We came to sing and play the blues. John Lee Hooker said, "*The blues is a healer all over the world*".

## Saturday October 30<sup>th</sup>

I spent the early morning hours finding and preparing postcards for mailing. The concierge lady said that she would mail them. It took nearly four weeks to arrive in the US.

There were four staff members who were from Moscow and who knew *the lay of the land* and offered to take some of us to a world famous flea market that was like Sears, it had everything which included Bootleg CD's for one or two bucks. There was bootleg USSR memorabilia (medals, compasses, flasks, etc.), on sale everywhere. Fake fur Russian hats; bear skinned rugs (with the head), religious artwork, and paintings, used books, bronze sculptures and T-shirts that made fun of Lenin using McDonalds golden arches.

Prostitution is legal and regulated in Russia. At the Golden Ring Hotel in Moscow, "Lucy" (A generic term for working girl) was relegated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. There was a sharp contrast between "Lucy" and how she dressed and the other 5 star patrons, however; apparently this relationship is underwritten by the rule of law. Why else would a hotel of this standard allow these tired weary half dressed ladies of the *day and night*, to enter and lounge in their establishment. I guess when everyone gets paid, everyone is happy. I thought a line in the Blues Brothers, "...the women, how much for the women"?

By my 3<sup>rd</sup> performance in Moscow I had found my sea legs with the Moscow audience and felt I really nailed the last concert. I had a few equipment issues but overall the back line sound staff was solid. My challenge was maintaining a groove since there was a language barrier and words seem less important. How could they like what you are singing about if they don't know what you are saying?

## Sunday October 31<sup>st</sup>

This was a day off. It was freezing rain. Some of the musicians returned to the Kremlin for more sightseeing. I slept all day.

That night about a dozen of us went to [B.B. Kings Blues Club](#) In Moscow. It is not apart of the official chain but I understand he approved of the place and his picture was on the wall showing him in the club. Finally, I will get to hear some *Blues in Russia*.

We set around picnic tables and were feted with the best in bar food (buffalo wings and shrimp). They were showing a Stevie Ray Vaughn performance video on the television. We jammed a little on the stage. I met the co-author of the book *Blues in Russia*, Alexander Demidov that was showcased in a recent [NPR interview](#) regarding Blues in Russia. I met and played with other acoustic blues artist and was given a CD of Russian blues artist. Hear tracks from [Blues in Russia](#). I signed the wall, *Frueland Jackson Was Here* with the date. One of the bartenders was black. He was wearing a fake Scottish beard and a kilt. I did not get a chance to speak with him. I have heard of Black Russians all my life. I was curious and hoped for another opportunity to speak with a black living in Russia. Up until then it was just Mighty Sam and I wearing the colors. I was a fly in a bucket of buttermilk.

## Monday November 1<sup>st</sup>

We arose early to board a bus and headed for the Moscow's Domodedovo airport to fly out on Aeroflot flight TU 154 to Rostov On Don, Russia. It was during this visit that the Heebie-Jeebies took over and had their way with me. I have always been a nervous flyer, however, after my experiences in Russia I am no longer anxious about flying. I faced all of my *flying* demons and so they ran off. I understand now that if you are the only game in town (Aeroflot Airlines with no competition) there is no incentive for an airline to repair or improve its products and services. Putting it mildly the national flights was unnerving, uncomfortable, intimidating and unsettling. Flying nationally created much anxiety among a few of the musicians myself included. The planes that carried us were old and looked well used and in need of fresh paint and upholstery. The only plus was that I knew at least the airliner had a track record. A couple of hits of Johnnie Walker Red (the only recognizable whisky label at the airport) and I was good to go.

We were bused to all airplanes and boarded from the tarmac. As I entered the passenger plane I saw a poorly painted-over putty job around the front entrance door. The emergency door over the wing seemed to be *McGiver-ed* with hanger wire. "...First class"? What *first class*? It was just *first*. I scolded myself for watching Airplane I and II. One musician attempted to recline his seat, and it went all the way back into the passenger's lap behind him. Some seats were loosely bolted in place and missing seatbelts or the seatbelt would not click. I saw a large screw lying on the floor. Maybe it came off the refreshment cart? When I flushed the *John*, I could have sworn I saw *outside*. There were no magazines to read and several *no nonsense-cut the small talk-this ain't customer service*, stewardesses to help us enjoy the flight. They all had this glum, straight ahead poker face that gave the phrase "*I'm just working a job*", new meaning. Well, what could I say? I was sitting there looking simple "Another fine mess you've gotten me into this time Stanley".

There was a constant drizzle. It was a gray overcast I-can-feel-my-arthritis kind of day. I braced myself and held my breath as we bumped along until we reached take-off speed. It was unbelievable. The take-off and flight and landing were as smooth as silk. I guess it was the *not knowing* that was causing the stress. They say that the first sign of self-repression is *tightening of the asshole*. I loosened up and exhaled when we landed in Rostov On Don. This feeling was only temporary I would later slip into deep paranoia on the eve of the election.

I noticed that the farther you travel from big cities like Moscow, that airport security was less restrictive. During the last decade, Russia has been the target of far more terrorist attacks than the United States has. Most of these have stemmed from the conflict in Chechnya—including the hijacking of a Russian airliner in Saudi Arabia in March 2001 and the hijacking of a commercial bus with 40 passengers in July 2001. Perhaps the most dramatic attacks were four apartment bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities during August and September 1999, which killed nearly 300 civilians. I read all of the State Department warnings before leaving home. Which read in part:

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... “American citizens in Russia should exercise caution and remain vigilant and aware of these heightened risks when planning use of or using any form of public transportation American citizens should also avoid large public gatherings that lack enhanced security measures.”

The Bush-Kerry election was coming up. All of the musicians were concerned about the election outcome and how we would be received by the fans the rest of the tour. Anti-Bush sentiments were pervasive in Russia and for sure in Turkey, a Muslim country that gave way to terrorist bombings a year ago in Istanbul. The local press always asked us who was our choice for US President. I do not care to discuss politics one-way or the other. Although we had CNN and the BBC in Moscow, we were not so lucky in Rostov. With no English speaking channels, we had to wait about 10 hours *after the fact* to get US news. If you travel abroad then you may be concerned about how our country is viewed its global neighbors, it could cost you everything.

We arrived at the Hotel Intourist in Rostov after a short bus ride. Although the hotel had the appearance of a *five star* profile down stairs; with the *cement* pond, time zone clocks, marble and mirrors and international flags, when you went upstairs a few of those five stars disappeared. The hotel was, however, undergoing renovation and construction. In the morning the hammering from the construction workers was ever-present. They started hammering at 7:00 a.m. You could see them and they could see you.

We were invited to a Rock and Roll club for dinner the evening of our arrival and after we got settled in our rooms, we were bused to the “Sex, Beer and Rock and Roll” club. The place was full. The local crowd was waiting for us. When we entered the club the crowd erupted in applause. They set a long table for twenty-five people. The applause was comforting after the flight from Moscow. They had a picture of the *Big Bopper* on the wall as well as Jimmy Hendricks, Elvis and other American Rock and Roll icons. The club owner sang *Rock Around the Clock* and the place erupted in 1950’s style dances. They Russians seem so elated to enjoy American popular music publicly and in-group fellowship.

They wined and dined us. A word to the wise is sufficient. Russian beer will knock you off your feet and their Vodka flows like flood waters. I heard my first Russian electric blues band at this Rock and Roll club. They were great. They played blues and Jazz. I was pleased to know that blues music really has taken root in Russia. It’s new to most of them and they are hungry for it.

We met a biker that we nicknamed *Deniro*. He spoke fairly good English. He had visited the US and was a fan of the Hell’s Angels motorcycle club. He was friendly and eager to help us and show us around. He wore a motorcycle jacket with The Cossacks insignia on the back. He wore gloves with the fingertips cut off and most of his front teeth were broken off. I surmised that his condition were the result of left hooks and not tooth decay.

## Monday November 1<sup>st</sup>

He had dark beady slanted eyes and walked with a swagger and seemed to supervise others easily. He had ease in moving around the city. He agreed to take me to a music store. I wanted to see Russian-made or Czechoslovakian acoustic guitars and buy a cap for the upcoming cold we would encounter as we made our way to St. Petersburg.

## Tuesday November 2<sup>nd</sup>

The breakfast buffet at Hotel Intourist was remarkable. They had a coffee machine that could make coffee in all varieties (espresso, cappuccino, American etc.).

*Deniro* showed up promptly at 11:00 looking forward to driving me around downtown Rostov. He had a beaten up van that seem better days. He said hauled his 24 motorcycles around in this van. He drove swiftly over the sidewalks at will and ran red lights with out concern. There was a section of downtown Rostov that only allowed delivery trucks and electric streetcars to enter. *Deniro* enters and continues through this section. He then pulled up along side a policeman directing traffic and jammed his brakes in front of him and said something to the policeman who hung his head made no eye contact. We continued on this main street until we reached a music store. Well, what could I say? "Another fine mess you've gotten me into this time Stanley". It dawned on me that I was probably riding with *the man*. Nobody was going to mess with me with *Deniro* by my side.

The Russian and Czechoslovakian made guitars were of poor quality and design. The no-commission guitar store salespersons operated the store in the dark. Which means they had no electricity and I had to use daylight to look around. None of the guitars were in tune. *Deniro* told me that the salespersons receive a salary whether they sell a guitar or not. The sales people were all in there sixties. I called this *second hand* capitalism less the entrepreneurial spirit.

All of the store clerks seemed humbled by his rough thuggish presence and demeanor. I continued to receive curious looks wherever we went. *Deniro* wore all black and was not a yuppie. We ended our day visiting a public radio station. This radio station was as modern and computerized as anything I have ever seen. Although *Deniro* says he was a volunteer disc jockey he looked out of place. I met the radio station staff and the station manager who all seemed tentative in their conversations. *Deniro* had the run of the place. Staff was scrambling around unlocking doors at his whim. We photographed together in one of the studios and he returned me to the hotel. There was a part of *Deniro* I liked. He was cool like Frank Sinatra. He had friends in high and low places. I did not, however want to hang out with him and his friends or visit his home.

There was something about the Rostov fans that I could not measure. The tickets were *sold out*. They crowded at the edge of the stage brimmed with lack luster excitement. They were different fans than what we found in Moscow.

## Tuesday November 2<sup>nd</sup>

The fans stood and stared. As strange as it sounds I wondered if they were told to show up. There was not a lot of *back and forth* banter with the crowd that I like to participate in. I never bonded with this audience and left the stage and the applause feeling out of sync. The other performers concurred about the crowd. Maybe it was me, I thought. I seemed to be performing on automatic pilot. This turned out to be my least favorite performance. I just wanted to get back to the hotel and get out of town. We finished the gig and returned to the hotel. The hotel's subculture had begun to emerge. There were lots of strangers standing in the hallways having conversations.

Unlike in Moscow at the Golden Ring Hotel, in Rostov "Lucy" was not relegated to any specific floor. She obviously attracted a lot of businessmen. I did not sleep at all last night. I sat in a chair dressed in my suit listening to the sounds of the hotel and looking out of the window at the cities nightlife. On the elevator ride to my room two gentlemen made me feel like a third wheel as they traded passionate kisses. I heard thumps and bumps in the night and strange muffled noises emanating from the hallways and the adjoining rooms. It sounded like someone was moving furniture next door. The elevator on my floor carried passengers until the wee hours. I had a couple of bottles of Russian beer. I drank slowly. The election was looming. There were no English speaking channels on the television. The only word I could make out on the television news channels was "nyet, nyet, nyet, *Boosh*".

While watching local television I saw The Simpsons overdubbed in Russian. Every time Homer said "Doh", he was saying *yes* in Russian. While watching the news I noticed that whenever an individual was arrested and brought to jail by the police they looked swollen and beaten up. Upon entering the station the arrestee would be videotaped as they were being processed. It dawned on me how lawless things were around here away from Moscow where there are uniforms everywhere. The police do not play and some ride in armored station wagons with peepholes. The undercurrents that the locals live with in their daily discourses were beginning to show. Nothing was like it seemed. Nothing.

Earlier that afternoon following my shopping trip, while having coffee in the lobby I asked *Deniro* about the Chechens and terrorism. *Deniro* said that we were about 200 miles from the Chechen region. "That's all", I chimed in. He continued that the Chechen people had a rich history and were poor and have suffered like the American Indians, that the land under their feet is oil rich and that there are key seaports in the region that are at stake with political consequences. He added that the old Chechens feel powerless and the young Chechens feel they have nothing to lose. I sensed that he was sympathetic to their cause but not their political methods.

I asked about the terrorist attack on the two airliners by women. "How were the women able to get on board the airplane", I asked? *Deniro* said a Russian soldier makes the equivalent of two hundred dollars a month and could be easily bribed. This is when I learned that one of two planes that were brought down killing a total of 89 people flew the same flight to Rostov

## Tuesday November 2<sup>nd</sup>

Was my door really locked? I was besieged with paranoia. Anyone could be bribed even the front desk personnel. Our faces were on billboards and banners all over town. The message was clear "Americans are here to perform blues". Who was *Deniro*? My room was separated from the other musicians.

I thought of the cartoon series Rocky and his Friends (with Bullwinkle the moose) that featured Boris and Natasha. They were portrayed as two bumbling Russian spies who wore black. They pretended to be friendly and wore many disguises. Their ultimate goal was to use any means necessary to sabotage and destroy concerns. Natasha would pronounce darling with a "K". I realized for the first time how ones thinking could be shaped and cultured to distrust through the use of cartoons. The hidden message was *distrust*.

I did not have my pocketknife or my key-chain mace. Damn. "Don't ever get caught like this again Frute", I said out loud. "Another fine mess you've gotten me into this time Stanley". The Hotel Intourist finally quieted down around 5:00 a.m. I waited for daylight and breakfast.

It was Election Day. I had an early breakfast and returned to my room. I needed to pack and be ready for the bus ride. There was a knock on my door. My room door did not have a peephole. I responded in my deepest bass voice, yes? The scratchy voice on the other side of the door had a Russian accent and called my name *Frooteland*. It was *Deniro*. He had come unannounced. How did he know my room number? He could have called from downstairs. What did he want? I opened the door. He wanted to know if I wanted to see some more of Rostov. I declined his offer. He then presented me with a gift of a brand new hat. It was a Russian police officer's hat. Since I did not have time to buy one he bought one for me as a gift. I thanked him. We shook hands. He left. I never told him that the hat was too small. I was wary of *Deniro* but I liked him. He was a survivor.

*Deniro* shared with me in an earlier conversation that when he was in high school that he was a member of the local Young Peoples Communist Party. One day one of his school chums reported him to the authorities for listening to some Rock and Roll music. There was a knock at his door. Local party officials confiscated his records and he got into a lot of trouble. He recalls those days with contempt. He makes up for it now by being a rebel a biker and a volunteer DJ at Rostov Public Radio station at 101.6. FM.

## Wednesday November 3<sup>rd</sup>

After we heard the final election returns, life continued. I received no negative responses from anyone while in Russia. We checked out of the Hotel Intourist. Billed out and bound to go to Ufa, Russia. The airliner was from the same litter as the others. There was limited legroom. The space was so tight my knees started to cry. I felt like cattle on this plane. I was glad to leave Rostov. My instincts and personal radar system had a real workout there. My pre-judgments had been wrong, plus I was tired and sleepy.

## Wednesday November 3<sup>rd</sup>

We had reservations at The President Hotel in Ufa, Russia. I was told that sixty percent of this hotel was owned by private investment. Their brand of capitalism is growing. According to a documentary I saw on the BBC network, Russia's current population is shrinking by about one million people a year. Many of the rural areas are ghost towns. The large urban areas are over crowded and young upwardly mobile Russians have learned that their degrees are worth more than 500 dollars a month elsewhere in the world. The government is aware of the brain drain. I predict in another twenty years that this trend will stabilize and level off and more of the peoples energy and creativity will abound at home. They are developing the infrastructures needed to take advantage of private enterprise and the market place. They are on the right path.

The grocery stores in Ufa are well stocked. The food is less expensive than what we pay in the US.

## Thursday November 4<sup>th</sup>

This was an off day. I never left the hotel. I slept. Ufa was an old working class Soviet town. There was high unemployment and heavy drinking among the men. Our group stood out like a sore thumb. The President Hotel in UFA, Russia was five stars from top to bottom and very secure. I tasted Russian beer for the first time. It was full, warm and strong (12% alcohol). I went back to sleep.

A down side to fancy hotels for me is the food. I am a simple southern eater. No red meat just chicken and fish. I do not like almonds on my fish nor do I like my fish watching me. The chicken I was served must have been a hen. It was as tough as my belt. I began to understand why Russian food is not exported like Italian, Chinese and the French; unless you are into plain potatoes, sausages and pork it was pretty bland to me. Although some of the dishes may have been considered an epicureans delight. They served caviar and salmon dishes, however did not find the food or its preparation, remarkable. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I could be in Asia and long for some Kentucky Fried Chicken.

In general, the main stream Russian woman is absolutely gorgeous. They are very feminine with style, grace, rhythm and intellectual capital. The prettiest crystal-like eyes I have ever seen. They looked like crystal cut glass. The mix from the ethnic diversity was apparent. In some cases women with a dark white smooth skin. I wondered if they were Caucasian. Despite what we have heard about Russian woman being mostly oversized working class stock wearing a head scarf, ninety –five percent of the women I saw were trim and fit. They were engaging in with their conversation but not competitive. They seem to march when they walk and they walked hard. They are trendy and wear very high- heeled shoes with sharp toes. Like *genie* shoes except the toe did not curl. They love to laugh and dance and carouse, many speak several foreign languages (four languages is a college requirement).

## Thursday November 4<sup>th</sup>

I saw ethnic types of women unknown to me before this visit. The female interpreter in Ufa said that she was a descendant from Tartars. (How neat is that?) Her skin tone was a cross between white and very high yellow but not pure white. Mongolian possibly? It is indescribable to me. She had high cheekbones and slanted eyes that required no make-up. She was so fine with none of the attitude. She also pronounced *darling* like Natasha in Rocky and Bullwinkle (Dah-link).

The men I encountered seemed easy going and friendly enough. They did not come across like they had something to prove. They have a tendency to tell you what to do and are use to working with people who cooperate and are punctual. They were helpful and focused. They know more about our history and culture than we do theirs. They love home, family and country. I sensed a quiet mutual respect in their handshakes and in their general demeanor. To some of the men we were silly spoiled Americans, to some of the women it was “*Yankee go home...and take me with you*”. ☺

I never saw anyone in Russia wearing sunglasses. I was the only one.

## Friday November 5<sup>th</sup>

Today’s schedule was the same as in Rostov. I did not see any of the sights in Ufa, Russia. The hotel seemed to be in a forest. I saw tiny birds. They were the same species but different colors, landing side ways on the hotel facade. They seem to defy gravity. They were the size of hummingbirds. I thought they were colorful enough to have *left town* for the winter. But here in Asia the south *is* cold too.

In this order: the sound check, press conference and the concert. I was first. This room was the smallest we played in maybe 1500 smiling faces. Although there was a huge auditorium in this facility and a small convention center, where they constructed the stage was more of a large foyer with tall ceilings. I never saw so many beer kegs. The fans were terrific and lively. I had a great time in Ufa, Russia. We left an impression and touched some hearts.

## Saturday November 6<sup>th</sup>

We checked out of The President Hotel in Ufa, Russia and boarded two buses that included sound technicians and representatives from the beer sponsor, EFES. We embarked on a ten-hour bus ride from Ufa, Russia to Ekaterinburg, Russia to hang our hats at the Trans Hotel. The road was bumpy and tiresome as we traveled thru the Ural Mountains. The accommodations at the bus stops were basic. We were at the beginning of the Russian cold season as we worked our way through the Ural Mountains, the inclement weather never let up. Our bus driver had a heavy foot and had to be asked several times to slow down. The roads were bumpy but passable and in certain parts were wide enough to drive six tanks side by side.

Comment:

Comment:  
**Old History**

The original Tatars probably came from E central Asia or central Siberia; unlike the [Mongols](#), they spoke a Turkic language and were possibly akin to the [Cumans](#) or Kipchaks and the [Pechenegs](#). They were nomads, moving across the vast Asian and Russian steppes with their families and their herds of cattle and sheep. After the conquests of the Mongol [Genghis Khan](#), the Mongol and Turkic elements merged, and the invaders became known in Europe as Tatars. The Mongol invasion led by [Batu Khan](#) into Hungary and Germany in 1241 is also known as the Tatar invasion.

**Recent History**

In 1783 the last Tatar state, Crimea, was annexed to Russia. The Nogais were gradually pushed eastward into the Caucasus by the Russian settlers. The Crimean Tatars themselves—except for the large numbers that emigrated to Turkey at the time of the Russian conquest of Crimea and after the Crimean War—remained in the Crimea until World War II and formed the basis of the Crimean Autonomous SSR, founded in 1921. It was dissolved in 1945, and all Crimean Tatars (about 200,000 in 1939) were exiled to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for alleged collaboration with the Germans. In 1956 they regained civil rights and since the late 1980s many have returned to Crimea. Following the disintegration of the USSR, leaders of [Tatarstan](#) began to press the Russian government for increased powers. In a 1992 referendum, over 61% of the voters supported a "sovereign" Tatarstan.

## Saturday November 6<sup>th</sup>

There are hundreds of miles of under developed farmland. Many abandoned villages. The nomadic groups that lived in some of these villages we saw had abandoned their homes for the winter to graze their sheep in the mountains we were told. You would see a village of a hundred houses but only one or two active smoke stacks. I had heard of *collective farms* but did not recognize any. I saw a few underfed cows during the drive. We stopped at our first rest stop. I received a lot of curious looks. I kept saying aloud 'Man, I am a long ways from Miss'sippi'. It cost 5 rubles to use the toilet, which was literally a *hole in the ground*.

We stopped again to wait for the bus behind us. As I said the bus driver had a heavy foot. We were in the middle of nowhere. The weather was turning worse. It was snow mixed with freezing drizzle. While we sat waiting for the other bus I saw a stray dog. He was real dirty, thin and shivering from the cold. "*He didn't look good and he didn't look bad. He just looked hungry and that made me sad*". He needed a serious bath *yesterday*. "What breed is it"? "I asked aloud. Another musician responded, 'It's a *sorry bastard*.'" I exited the bus and tossed him some lunchmeat sandwiches. I could count his ribs. When the bus pulled off I looked at him and he looked at me. The dog never spoke but I saw gratitude in his eyes.

We are half way to Ekaterinburg, Russia where the Czar and his family were taken before they met with ill fate. We stopped at our second rest stop/restaurant, which was clean and neat, but the toilets were closed for repair. I did not like the looks of the food but everybody else did. It was lunchtime. They had goat meat and rice, pork meat and Borsht soup. Yuk! The last thing I wanted was bellyache on tour. I am sure health department inspected the goat meat yesterday, right!

Already having lunch was four of the local males drinking vodka at a table. They were finishing their third bottle and ordering a fourth. The Russian women complain about the alcoholism among the men folk and that finding sober, educated companionship is a task.

One more final rest-stop/store before we arrived in Ekaterinburg, Russia (pronounced Yeka-terin-burg). The pay toilets that was spotless. They sold Russian CD's and DVD's and chocolate. They even had a flat screen T.V.

We reached the Trans Hotel in Ekaterinburg, Russia around 11:00 P.M. *Yak time*. I was glad to be out of the bus and on *terra firma*. We had a late dinner and then it was lights out for me.

I wanted to take a nice sit down bath and soak like a teabag but the water smelled like sulfur. The smell was awful. I smelled it again at dinner in the peas and rice. That was enough for me. I was going to look for the *Colonel* at the next opportunity.

## Sunday November 7<sup>th</sup>

After breakfast we followed the same work schedule. We were invited to do a one-hour interview for MTV Russia. I hope to have a copy of the program soon. While I was there I saw what I thought was a *Black Russian*. I studied his features. I was unfamiliar with his gene pool so I took a chance and said, "Hey cuz, where is everybody"? I said. I had heard the term *Black Russian* all of my life and was curious. Maybe it was just the name of a cocktail. Who are these Black Russians, and where are they, and how did they get here? He goes, "Huh"? I said 'where is everybody living at? I asked with a smile, is there a crow's nest in this town? He looked confused so I asked him where he was from. He was from Zaire, Africa and came to St. Petersburg to finish school. He married a Russian woman and has been a resident the past seven years. I am resolved. I now believe that a Black Russian is a mythological figure or the name for a cocktail drink.

The press conference was lively. The fans were fantastic. We sold out, again! It was a marvelous sight to see young folks digging the blues in its various styles. Many were curious about my ability to perform alone on stage in front of thousands of people. Well, me too.

## Monday November 8<sup>th</sup>

We checked out of the Trans Hotel in Ekaterinburg, Russia and flew to the *Jewel of the Nile*. The "*San Francisco*" of Russia, The City of St. Petersburg. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703. If you could visit only one city in Russia, *go* to St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg is old, exotic, picturesque, artsy and beautiful. It was called Leningrad at some point in its history and subsequently returned to its given name St. Petersburg. It is a city with a rich history. There are lot of wonderful sights to visit such as: The Palace Square, Alexander's Column, The Hermitage Museums that holds the largest repository of art in Russia. There are three million exhibits in these museums. This was an amazing unforgettable sight. The Winter Palace has fourteen miles of rooms and halls with unbelievable artwork and show of opulence and *splendor*. I would say that the Czars were into *conspicuous consumption*. A sign read: "If you stood in front of every exhibit for one minute and spend eight hours every day in the museum, it would take you almost fifteen years to see all of the exhibits". I believe it.

When I saw the St Isaacs Cathedral for the first time it dwarfed exponentially any house of god I had ever saw or visited. The St. Isaacs Cathedral took forty years to build. If you could break off a doorknob and bring it home, you could probably retire for the rest of your life. Everything is gold or some precious or semi precious stone. I saw rare blue malachite, amber, and more. There was stained glass art throughout this edifice and artwork on the ceiling. St Isaac's has a big dome that can be seen for miles. It strikes an imposing presence in the center of the city. We were holed up across the street at the Hotel Angeletterre. This *Grand Dame* hotel has been around for many years and is captured in many paintings. The tour guide and translator told us Dostoyevsky and other artists would come to this hotel to study and refresh themselves. I can say now that I have stayed in some of the finest hotels in the world.

## Tuesday November 9<sup>th</sup>

Some of the people we met in Moscow returned to see our final performance in St. Petersburg including co-author of the book *Blues in Russia*. Alexander Demidov and Michael Urban, co-author of *Russia Gets the Blues: Music, Culture, and Community in Unsettled Times*. The book describes how the fall of Communism in the country has led to a lot of bad pop music, while at the same time fostering a passion for American-style blues.

I met Ms Andrey Machnev who leads the Children Jazz Band ([www.jazzschool.ru](http://www.jazzschool.ru)) and gave me their current CD entitled Happy Birthday. This is not kids stuff it is real jazz. I had a wonderful time in St. Petersburg where I did most of my shopping and souvenir hunting. It was my last night. Was going to let my hair down and I did. The fans were great. I separated from the rest of the group and I checked out the hotel at 5:30 a.m. to be driven to the airport and flown to Paris, France and then Sweet Home Chicago.

## November 10, 2004

I arrived at O'Hare airport around 4:00 p.m. CDST. My guitar case was lost somewhere between St. Petersburg, Russia and Paris, France but that's another story for another time.

Blues in Russia is spreading like wild fires. It is the new frontier for the touring musicians. This was the best tour of my career. I enjoyed hanging out with my fellow musicians and the cool tour staff who took care of me from the moment we met until the end. Mike Leahy and Dan Peraino are rock solid people. Thanks for the gig. I want to give a shout out and a big high five to the tour staff. They are a dream team Somebody tell Lil' Charlie and the Nighcats and Mighty Sam McClain and his band that I wish them all safe flights and *please come home for Christmas*. They are scheduled to return to the US on December 13th, and are currently touring Turkey, I love to travel but I am happy to be on American soil and tomorrow I will be having turkey, turkey.

☺ Happy Thanksgiving





Fruteland performs in Moscow  
October 28 2004 at Auditorium