

Fruteland Jackson's Travel Journal
The Fifteenth Annual Russian Blues Tour:
From the Ground Up and Back
October 26 to November 10th 2004

I departed American soil on **October 26, 2004**, to perform at the Fifteenth Annual Efes Blues Festival and Russian Tour—the primary country of the former Soviet Union. I kept a journal and took four hundred digital photographs. Although my camera went on the fritz, I learned that when the battery power weakens, it affects the camera's ability to focus quickly and sharply. In my case, there is a green tinge on all pictures where I used flash or fluorescent lighting. My camera would not focus sharply, even while using the flash, or the lighting was insufficient.

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 American musicians are bringing. Many Blacks have surrendered their cultural claim to blues music, and now it has become world music with more emphasis on performance than culture and is enjoyed by fans worldwide. I was intrigued and excited at the prospect of going on a tour in Asia. The opportunity was irresistible despite the current political climate of terrorism, my nervousness as a flyer, and the upcoming national election in the U.S.

As a reward for overruling my anxieties, I was besieged with wonderment as I embarked on this *once-in-a-lifetime* experience. I was happy and humbled. I would travel to cities where few American blues musicians have toured and performed blues music. Many in the audience would be first-time listeners. I will never forget my experience in Russia. I was overwhelmed by the historical sites in Russia, the monuments, architecture, and the people who stand firm and remain a living testimony to the country's rich history. I learned firsthand that the Russian people could be as patriotic as we are. Some fifteen years into their democracy, they seem passionate in their love of freedom, especially among their youth. They love Blues music as well as Jazz and Rock and Roll.

We performed to *sellout* crowds. The audience was eager, enthusiastic, and under thirty-five. I opened each concert and played before the largest crowds under one roof in my career (1,500 to 6,000). Following me was Little Charlie, the Night Cats, and the headliner Mighty Sam McClain rounded out this tour group.

The booking agency's staff and the promoter's staff were magnificent. In all my experiences, they have set the gold standard for professionalism and efficiency in organizing and facilitating this tour. We had the best accommodations available and could quickly be moved in and out of cities and airports.

After departing from O'Hare airport to New York's JFK International airport, 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.

The musicians seemed to gravitate towards each other as we deplaned and headed for Russian Customs. There was a passport check, then baggage claim, where the odd-shaped instrument cases began to expose their owners. When I saw the only other black musician, I figured rightly that that must be Mighty Sam McClain.

I encountered a *no-nonsense cut the small talk* customer service agent who 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 any social interaction requiring accessibility. It was the key to getting anything you wanted or needed, getting around, and going home. From the Hotel front desk to the currency exchange windows, your passport and whatever is on those attached stapled documents must be presented on demand for identification if you wish to enter certain buildings or continue walking the streets.

The Russian government takes security seriously, especially after 9/11 when terrorists attacked the Beslan Elementary school in the Russian Republic of North Ossetia, which left nearly 340 hostages dead, including many children. I felt monitored all the time, even in my hotel room. I would look at the smoke alarm and other gadgets on the ceiling, wondering where the cameras were hidden. I would subsequently discover while on this tour that I had been groomed with suspicion as a child while watching Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoons on television.

When we cleared Customs, the tour staff was waiting for us with a warm bus. After the introductions, the tour staff counted heads. We began this blues tour odyssey halfway around the world. Our first stop was The Golden Ring Hotel, located in the center of Moscow. We ran into traffic jams from the airport until we arrived at the Hotel—a norm in this densely populated city of 11 million people. Ninety-nine percent of urban dwellers live in apartment buildings. There are few places to park your car. Cars are parked in yards and on the sidewalks. The skies above remained gray.

The Golden Ring Hotel held five stars and was very secure. All Russian hotels collect passports upon registration and keep them for at least one hour. The lobby was designed with *marble and mirrors* with a gift shop and other high-end stores. I began right away learning how to convert U.S dollars into Russian rubles. Near the elevator was a *no-nonsense-cut the small talk*-plain clothes security man. He had menacing beady eyes and made it a point to give me the once-over at every passing. Your digital room key card was your passport inside the Hotel. Allowing you to eat, ride the elevator, and operate the lights in your room.

Wednesday, October 27

My suite was elegant and very comfortable, with a sitting room, bath, shower, heated pipes to warm the bath towels, and an emergency pull rope to alert the front desk if you fall and cannot get up. Like in Times Square, New York, a giant flashing neon sign across the street from the Hotel shined in my room window. The hotel service was excellent. I was curious about Russian cuisine. Our tour group was scattered about the Hotel. The musicians voted to have Italian cuisine even though. I would later live to regret my impatient remark.

After dinner, I would sit for an interview on Moscow television with an interpreter. 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. After being searched taken to a makeup room. The sight of the military and their long rifles and automatic weaponry was intimidating. The escort whisked me into a modern studio, where I completed the interview.

Thursday, October 28

Breakfast was served on the top floor of this Hotel. The breakfast buffets were lavish. They served everything you could want and foods you did not wish to eat for breakfast, such as raw oriental dishes. During a typical daily routine, I forego breakfast. However, to maintain a high energy level, I got into the habit of eating whenever meals were served. In the center of the dining area was a harpist dressed in a black evening gown playing music to accompany our dining experience. She played some American tunes to make us feel at home. The omelets were cooked on the spot to order. The eggs were so yellow they looked orange the fresh fruit was delicious. I enjoyed these miniature 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 little girl's doll set, be careful! It is loaded with caffeine. I was wired after drinking a cup. I cleaned up and made the bed when I returned to my room.

I was still jet-lagged from our arrival. We all had afternoon sound check schedules at the upcoming venue. Mighty Sam McClain and his six-piece band went first, and I was last. This venue would be the only one that did not sell out due in part because it was a Thursday night, but man, was room packed! Most of these venues were sports theaters for basketball or hockey games. They were operated by the government and secured by uniformed military security. I thought this was fine, 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 and many of their captors. Following each venue's sound check, we held a press conference before the local entertainment media. We had at least two translators at each meeting. One of the primary sponsors of the Fifteenth Annual Blues Festival was Efes Pilsner Beer. The Efes PR staff knew how to get things done. Our interview table was decorated with their corporate beer logo. I found that the Efes beer went down well and was satisfying.

Many of the questions posed at the press conference were regarding the definitions of blues music—the *DNA* of blues music. Although we gave out fundamental definitions, e.g., the blues are the *facts of life* expressed musically. They seem to be where the U.S. was in our musical development some thirty years ago.

The blues fans were terrific and, for the most part, under thirty-five, middle-class, and intellectual. They were hungry for music, photographs, and autographs. We all had a ball.

Friday, October 29

Today was pretty much the same as yesterday. I was running on about five hours of sleep and adrenalin. Since show time was 7 p.m., we went sightseeing or souvenir hunting that morning. 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 and 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 exciting. We were allowed limited access to tour inside the church. The church minarets and the domes reminded me of scoops of ice cream with sprinkles, and the church design reminded me of a tower in a Rudyard Kipling novel. It is a fantastic piece of architecture. Again, it is 850 years old and was amazing to behold. It held lots of religious artwork and opulent fixtures. I marveled at the construction of the building and the low doorways. I assumed that early Russian people were shorter in height.

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

Saturday, October 30

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 U.S. There were tour staff members from Moscow who knew the lay of the land and offered to take some of us to a world-famous flea market, just like Sears. It had everything, which included Bootleg C.D.s for one or two bucks. There were 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, soviet era medals, and T-shirts that made fun of Lenin using McDonald's golden arches.

Prostitution is legal and regulated in Russia. The rule of law underwrites this relationship. For example, At the Golden Ring Hotel in Moscow, "Lucy" (A generic term for working girl) was relegated to the 3rd and breakfast floors. However, there was a sharp contrast between "Lucy," how she dressed, and the other 5-star female patrons. 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 thought of a line from the Blues Brothers, "...the women, how much/or the women"? I guess when everyone gets paid, everyone is happy.

By my 3rd performance in Moscow, I had found my sea legs with the Russian audience and felt I nailed the last concert. I had a few equipment issues, but the backline staff was solid overall. My challenge was maintaining a groove since there was a language barrier, and words seemed less critical. How do they appreciate what you are singing about if they don't know what you are saying?

Sunday, October 31

Today was an off day. It was freezing rain. Some of the musicians returned to the Kremlin for more sightseeing. I slept all day. That evening about a dozen of us went to *B.B. Kings Blues Club* in Moscow. It is not a part of the official BB King Blues club chain, but I understand he B.B. King visited the club and approved of the place. . King's picture was on the wall showing him in the club. Finally, I wanted to hear some local "Blues in Russia."

We sat around picnic tables and ordered their best in bar food (Buffalo wings and shrimp). There was a Stevie Ray Vaughn performance video on television. I met the co-author of "Blues in Russia," Alexander Demidov. The other co-author Keith Urban gave an interview on NPR regarding their book. I joined other acoustic blues artists on stage. I was later presented with a CD by my fellow acoustic musicians. I signed their wall of fame.

"Fruteland Jackson Was Here" with the date. I noticed that 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 talk with a black man living in Russia.

Monday, November 1

We left early on a bus and headed for Moscow's Domodedovo airport to fly out on Aeroflot flight TU 154 to Rostov-on-Don, Russia. During this visit, the Heebie-Jeebies took over and had their way with me. I am no longer anxious about flying. I faced all of my *flying* demons until they were frightened off. I understand that if Aeroflot Airlines has no competition, it has no incentive to repair or improve its airline services. The national flights were uncomfortable and unsettling. Flying created anxiety among our tour group. The planes that carried us were well-used and needed fresh paint and upholstery. The only plus was that I knew at least the airliner had a track record. I was good to go with a couple of shots of Johnnie Walker Red (the only recognizable whisky label at the airport).

We were bused to the airplane and boarded from the tarmac. As I boarded the plane, I saw a poorly painted-over putty job around the front entrance door. The emergency door over the wing was rigged with hanger wire. "First class? What first class? It was just first ", One musician attempted to recline in his seat, and the seat reclined back into the rear passenger's lap behind him. Some seats were loosely bolted in place. Some had missing seatbelts or seatbelts that would not lock. I saw a large screw lying on the floor. Maybe it came from the refreshment cart? When I flushed the toilet, I could have sworn I saw the outside sky. There were several *no-nonsense-cut small-talk* flight attendants to help us enjoy the flight. They all had this glum, straight-ahead poker face look.

It was cloudy and overcast. There was a constant drizzle. I braced and held my breath as we bumped along until we reached takeoff speed. It was unbelievable. The takeoff and flight, and landing were as smooth as silk. I guess it was not knowing what caused the stress. They say that the first sign of self-repression is the tightening of the asshole. I loosened up and exhaled when we landed in Rostov-on-Don. This feeling was only temporary. I would later experience anxiety and paranoia on the eve of election day.

After leaving Moscow, the airport security was less restrictive. During the last decade, Russia has been the target of far more terrorist attacks than the United States. Most of these attacks stemmed from the conflict in Chechnya, including the hijacking of a Russian airliner in Saudi Arabia in March 2001 and the hijacking 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. The State Department warnings read in part:

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

All the musicians were concerned about the election outcome and how the fans would receive us for the rest of the tour. Anti-Bush sentiments were pervasive in Russia and Turkey, a Muslim country that gave way to terrorist bombings a year ago in Istanbul. We were able to watch CNN and the BBC in Moscow. However, we were not so lucky in Rostov-on-Don. With no English-speaking channels, we had to wait about 10 hours *after the fact* to get U.S. news. When traveling abroad, I had deep concerns about how our global neighbors perceive our country. It could cost you everything.

We arrived at the Hotel In tourist in Rostov-o-Don after a short bus ride. Although the Hotel had the appearance of a five-star profile 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. By sunrise, the hammering from the construction workers was ever-present. The hammering began at 7:00 a.m. You could see the construction workers from your hotel bed, and they could see you.

After settling in our rooms, we traveled by bus to the Sex, Beer, and Rock and Roll Club. Our tour group was invited for dinner. Upon our arrival., the local crowd was waiting for us. When we entered the club, the crowd erupted in applause. They provided 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 and 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. The Russians seem delighted to enjoy American popular music while fellowshipping with American musicians publicly.

They wine 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 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 reasonably good English. He had visited the U.S. and was a Hell's Angels motorcycle club fan. He was friendly and eager to help us and show us around. He wore a motorcycle jacket with The Cossack's logo on the back. DeNiro had gloves with the fingertips cut off. His front teeth were broken out. I surmised that his condition resulted from left hooks and not tooth decay.

He had dark, beady, slanted eyes, walked with a swagger, and seemed to supervise other locals easily. He claimed to know 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

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

DeNiro arrived promptly at 11:00, looking forward to driving me around downtown Rostov-On-Don. He had a beaten-up van that had seen better days. He said he hauled his motorcycles around in this van. He moved swiftly over the sidewalks at will and ran red lights without concern. A section of downtown Rostov-on-Don only allowed delivery trucks and electric streetcars to enter. DeNiro enters and continues through this section. He then pulled up alongside a policeman directing traffic, jammed his brakes in front of him, and said something to the policeman, who hung his head and 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 non-commissioned guitar store salespersons operated the store in the dark. They had no electricity, so I used the existing daylight to look around. None of the guitars were in tune. The salespeople were all in their sixties. DeNiro told me that the store clerks receive a salary whether they sell a guitar or not. I saw this business as second-hand capitalism without the entrepreneurial spirit. The music store staff was intimidated by DeNiro's rough, thuggish presence. I was viewed with curiosity. DeNiro wore all black. He did not fit the profile of a yuppie.

We ended our day at a public radio station. This radio station was as modern and computerized as it came. Although DeNiro says he was a volunteer disc jockey, he looked out of place at the radio station. I met the radio station staff and the station manager, who all seemed uneasy in their conversations. DeNiro walked around as if he owned 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 want to hang out with him any longer and his friends or visit his home.

There was something about the Rostov-o-Don fans that I could not measure. They were different than the fans we met in Moscow. The fans crowded at the edge of the stage, brimming with lackluster excitement. However, it was a sold-out venue.

Tuesday, November 2, continued

The fans stood and stared without any focus as if they had been ordered to show up. There was not a lot of banter with the audience. I never bonded with this audience and left the stage and the applause feeling out of sync. Maybe it was me, I reflected. The other musicians concurred about the crowd. This performance was my least favorite. 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, the Hotel in Rostov did not relegate "Lucy" to any specific floor. She attracted a lot of business people. That night I did not sleep. I sat in a chair dressed in my suit, listening to the sounds of the Hotel and looking out the window at the city's 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. Whenever Homer said "Doh," he said *yes* in Russian. While watching the news, I noticed that whenever a suspect was arrested and brought to jail by the police, they looked swollen and beaten up. Upon entering the police station, the arrestee was videotaped and processed. It dawned on me how lawlessness was pervasive away from Moscow, where uniforms are everywhere. The police do not play, and some rode in armored SUVs with peeholes. The undercurrents the locals live within their daily lives began to show. Nothing was as it seemed. Nothing.

Following my shopping trip, I had coffee in the lobby earlier that afternoon, and I asked *DeNiro* about the Chechens and terrorism. He 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 had suffered like the American Indians, that the land under their feet was oil-rich, and that there were critical seaports in the region that were 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?" *DeNiro* said a Russian soldier makes two hundred dollars a month and could easily take a bribe. I learned that our tour group flew the same flight to Rostov in one of two planes brought down by the female terrorist, killing 89 people.

Was my hotel room door locked? I became paranoid. Could the hotel staff be bribed? Our faces were on billboards and banners all over town. The message was clear "Americans are here to perform blues." Was *DeNiro* a plant?

I thought of the cartoon series Rocky and his Friends with Bullwinkle the Moose, which featured Boris and Natasha. These cartoon characters were portrayed as two bumbling Russian spies who wore all black. They pretended to be friendly and wore many disguises. Their ultimate goal was to use any means necessary to trick, sabotage and destroy U S government concerns. The hidden message was distrust. Natasha would say darling with a "K." I realized for the first time how one's thinking could be shaped to distrust through cartoons.

I did not have my pocket knife or my keychain mace. Damn. "Don't ever get caught like this again, Fruteland. The Hotel 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 most resounding 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-on-Don. 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, 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 D.J. at Rostov Public Radio station at 101.6. F.M. He also told me about the police officer he drove up to downtown. The officer had turned him into the authorities for having his music collection in high school. But now, things are different.

Wednesday, November 3

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-on-Don. My instincts and personal radar system had a real work out there. My pre-judgments had been wrong, plus I was tired and sleepy.

We had reservations at The President Hotel in Ufa, Russia. Sixty percent of this Hotel was said to be owned by private investment. Their brand of capitalism was improving. According to a BBC documentary, 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 overcrowded 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 people's energy and creativity will flourish at home. They are developing the infrastructures needed to take advantage of private enterprises in the marketplace. 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 U.S.

Thursday, November 4

Today is another off day. I never left the Hotel. I slept. Ufa was an old working-class Russian 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 secure and rated five stars. I tasted Russian beer for the first time. The Russian beer was warm and strong (12% alcohol). I went back to sleep.

A downside to fancy hotels for me was the food. I am a simple southern eater. No red meat, just chicken and fish. I do not like almonds on my fish or want my fish dinner watching me eat them. The chicken they served was a hen. It was as tough as my belt. I began to understand why Russian food is not popular in the U.S. as Italian, Chinese, or French; unless you are into plain potatoes, sausages, and pork, it was pretty bland to me. However, some dishes may have been considered a gourmet's delight. They served caviar and salmon' However, I 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 mainstream Russian woman is gorgeous. They are fit and 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 of ethnic diversity was apparent.

In some cases, women with dark white smooth skin. They left me wondering if they were Caucasian despite what we have heard about Russian women being mostly large working-class stock wearing a head scarf. They were engaging in conversation but not competitive. They seem to march when they walk. 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, dance, and socialize. Many spoke several foreign languages (four languages is a college requirement at some colleges).

The female interpreter I met in Ufa said she was a descendant of tartars. Her skin tone was a cross between white and very high yellow but not pure white. Mongolian possibly? I found it to be indescribable. She had high cheekbones and slanted eyes that required no makeup. She was gorgeous. She also pronounced darling like Natasha in Rocky and Bullwinkle (Dah-link). I never saw anyone in Russia wearing sunglasses. The men I encountered seemed easygoing and friendly enough. They did not act as if they had something to prove. They tend to tell you what to do and are accustomed to working with people who cooperate and are punctual. Many Russian people know our history and culture. They are patriotic. There was quiet mutual respect in their handshakes. To some of the men, we were silly, spoiled Americans; to some women, it was "Yankee go home."... and take me with you.

Friday, November 5

Today's schedule was the same as in Rostov-on-Don. 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 sideways on the hotel facade. They seem to defy gravity.

In this order: the sound check, press conference, and the concert. I was first. This room was the smallest. Although there was a massive auditorium in this facility and a small convention center, where they constructed the stage was more of a large foyer with tall ceilings. There were lots of beer kegs. The fans were terrific and lively. We left an impression and touched some hearts. I had a great time in Ufa, Russia.

Saturday, November 6

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 Yekaterinburg, 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 was 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.

There are hundreds of miles of underdeveloped farmland—many abandoned villages. The nomadic groups lived in some of these villages. I was told they left their homes for the winter to graze their sheep in the mountains. You would see a town of a hundred houses but only one or two active smokestacks. 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 and received a lot of curious glances. I said aloud, "Man, I am a long way from Mississippi". It cost 5 rubles to use the toilet that was a mere hole in the ground.

We stopped again to wait for the bus behind us. As I said, the bus driver had a heavy foot. Our bus was in the middle of nowhere. The weather was turning worse. It was snow mixed with freezing drizzle. While waiting for the other bus, I saw a stray dog. He was filthy, 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 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 halfway to the next stop, 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 was not fond of the looks of the food, but everybody else did. It was lunchtime. They had goat meat and rice or pork meat and Borsht soup. Yuk! The last thing I wanted was a bellyache on tour. I am sure the health department inspected the goat meat yesterday, I said sarcastically.

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

One more final rest-stop/store before we arrived in Ekaterinburg, Russia (Pronounced Yeka-terin-burg). The pay toilets there were spotless. They sold Russian CDs, DVDs, and chocolate.

We reached the Trans Hotel in Ekaterinburg, Russia, around 11:00 p.m. *Yak time*. I was glad to be out of the bus. We had a late dinner, and 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 Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant I saw earlier.

Sunday, November 7

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 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 are all the black folks"? I had heard the term Black Russian all my life and was curious. Maybe it was just the name of a cocktail. Who are these Black Russians, where are they, and how did they get here? I asked with a smile, is there a black community in this town? He looked confused, so I asked him where his home was. He replied, Zaire, Africa, and that he came to St. Petersburg to finish school. He had married a Russian woman and has been a resident for the past seven years.

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

Monday, November 8

We checked out of the Trans Hotel in Ekaterinburg, Russia, and flew to what I called 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, I say *go* to St. Petersburg. This old, exotic, picturesque, artsy city is unforgettable. 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 many beautiful sights to visit, such as The Palace Square, Alexander's Column, and The Hermitage Museums, which hold Russia's largest repository of art.

There are three million exhibits in these museums. The Winter Palace has fourteen miles of rooms and halls, incredible artwork, and a show of luxury 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 spent eight hours every day in the museum, it would take you almost fifteen years to see all of the presentations.

When I saw the St Isaacs Cathedral for the first time, it dwarfed any house of god I had ever seen 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. St. Isaacs strikes an imposing presence in the center of the city. St Isaac's has a giant dome that is seen for miles. There is stained glass art throughout the cathedral and artwork on the ceiling. We were lodging across the street at the Hotel Angleterre. This *Grand Dame* hotel has been around for many years, 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.

Tuesday, November 9

Some of the people we met in Moscow returned to see our final performance in St Petersburg, including the co-author of the book *Blues in Russia*. Alexander Demidov and Michael Urban, co-author of *Russia Get 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 led the Children Jazz Band (www.jazzschool.ru) and gave me their current Happy Birthday CD. Their music is not kid stuff. It is authentic Jazz.

I had a wonderful time in St. Petersburg, where I did most of my shopping and souvenir hunting. It was my last night. I 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 of 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 had been lost. It was somewhere between St. Petersburg, Russia, and Paris, France, but that's another story.

Blues in Russia is spreading like wildfires. It is the new frontier for touring musicians. This was the best tour of my career. I enjoyed hanging out with my fellow musicians and the excellent tour staff who cared for us from the moment we met until the end. Mike Leahy and Dan Perino are Rock solid people. Thanks for the gig. I want to give the tour staff a shout-out and a big high five. They are a dream team. Please Tell Lil' Charlie, the Nightcats, 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 U.S. on December 13 after completing the tour in Turkey, I love to travel, but I am happy to be on American soil; tomorrow,

Happy Thanksgiving

PS

There are Black Russians

- <http://www.trbimg.com/img-546bd758/turbine/la-fg-c1-1119-black-russian-americans-pictures-003/1000/1000x563>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abkhazians_of_African_descent



