Getting By on the Blues: Music, Culture, and Community in a Transitional Russia

MICHAEL URBAN

This study concerns a particular subculture in contemporary Russian society that is based on blues music and its attendant cultural associations. An estimated twenty thousand individuals—performers, promoters, and fans—comprise what is here called the country's blues community.[1] Because it is informed by an imported idiom, the blues community shares certain general characteristics with most of its counterparts appearing in the late and post-Communist periods. First, and most obvious, would be the fact that these subcultures have been more or less consciously constructed from information reaching the country in the form of printed materials, films, television and radio, recordings, and the reports of those who have traveled abroad. Unlike ethnic or religious groupings into which members are for the most part born, membership in, say, Russia's punk, pagan, Rastafarian, rockabilly, or blues subcultures would admit to a large measure of personal choice. The elements of conscious construction and chosen membership would thus indicate the presence of a sizeable cognitive component in these subcultures and suggest their active, self-conscious inclination toward valorized, but unconventional, social practices that provide the basis for alternative communities.[2] The widespread disillusionment and dislocation occasioned by the

I wish to thank the following individuals for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article: Donald Brenneis, G. William Domhoff, Eugene Huskey, Richard Jennings, Alexei Kuzmin, Vladimir Padunov, Mark Slobin, Vadim Volkov, Alexei Yurchak, and this journal's two anonymous referees. I am also grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the International Research and Exchanges Board, whose funding has supported the field research on which this study is based.

[1]As used here, the term "community" connotes a collection of persons bound together by common practices, norms, and interests. It does not imply—any more than would, say, "the U.S. business community"—either a uniform outlook among members on relevant matters, or personal contacts connecting all who fall within the category. Like any community not based entirely on face-to-face relations, Russia's blues community is to a large extent "imagined."

[2]This consideration touches on the character of new social movements, theorized in particular by Albert Melucci in his *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge, England, 1996). See also Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (University Park, PA, 1991); idem, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, England, 1998); and Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford, 1997).

The Russian Review 61 (July 2002): 409–35

collapse of communism would seem to place a premium on such activities. As we know, the bulk of the population has effectively withdrawn from civic life, preferring the solace and security offered by those informal personal networks that had constituted communism's vibrant underside.[3] The growth of subcultures would be congruent with this pattern, offering alternative worlds in which adherents experience new forms of social interaction anchoring individual identities in the circle of familiar others.

Subcultures constitute sites on which claims to status and recognition can be redeemed. For our purposes, it is unimportant whether such claims have been directly frustrated by the prevailing order—say, instances in which individuals have been denied placement in higher educational institutions or career prospects in one or another field of endeavor—or whether the individuals themselves have simply eschewed involvement in it. The important thing would be that subcultural life contains its own status distinctions wherein individuals can locate themselves and experience social recognition.[4] Finally, and in direct correspondence to their conscious construction, the subcultures in question tend to be internally disputatious. Inasmuch as they are based on particular sets of autonomously conceived practices and norms, the maintenance of their boundaries is inherently problematic. Deviations from prescribed patterns can always elicit censure, just as extant practices and norms always invite reinterpretation on the basis of new information drawn from the very sources on which they are purportedly based.[5]

Russia's blues community exhibits these three features commonly encountered in the country's new subcultures. Cognitively, blues music and its cultural associations have been adapted by adherents as a template informing their individual and collective lives. Questions of status and recognition are also manifest within the community, along with considerable controversy over questions surrounding the authenticity of performance and the adaptation of the music and its cultural significance to the contemporary Russian setting. What distinguishes the blues community itself from other subcultures would lie at the intersection of the music's cultural content and the manner in which it has been appropriated and adapted by those in the community. Along these lines, there are three aspects of the blues community which, taken together, specify its distinctive niche among Russian subcultures. The first would involve the matter of interpretation, the significance that Russians attach to the music and the way that this is reinforced in the community by its core mode of organization, small groups of performers whose social relations tend to exhibit certain characteristics associated with the Soviet *kollektiv* (collective). Second, would be the fact that

[3]Marc Howard, *Demobilized Societies: Understanding the Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge, England, forthcoming); Victoria Bonnell and George Breslauer, eds., *Russia in the New Century: Stability or Disorder* (Boulder, CO, 2001); James Alexander, *Political Culture in Post-Communist Russia: Formlessness and Recreation in a Traumatic Transition* (New York, 2000); Victor Sergeyev, *The Wild East: Crime and Lawlessness in Post-Communist Russia* (Armonk, NY, 1998).

[4]For the post-Communist period this aspect has been treated in empirical detail in the essays in V. V. Kostyushev, ed., *Molodezhnye dvizheniia i subkul'tury Sankt-Peterburga* (St. Petersburg, 1999). Comparable analyses for the late Soviet period can be found in D. V. Ol'shanskii, *Neformaly: Gruppovoi portret v inter'ere* (Moscow, 1990); and in M. V. Maliutin, "Neformaly v perestroike: Opyt i perspektivy," in *Inogo ne dano*, ed. Iu. N. Afanas'ev (Moscow, 1988), 210–27.

[5]In particular see A. Gaidukov, "Molodezhnaia subkul'tura slavianskogo neoiazychestva v Peterburge," and A. Godina, "Vzaimodeistvie subkul'tury i kul'tury (Na primere dvizheniia indeanistov)" both in *Molodezhnye dvizheniia*, 24–50 and 51–66, respectively.

Russia's blues community consists primarily of individuals drawn from the ranks of the urban intelligentsia: professionals, creative artists, and students. Members of these social groups have adapted the blues idiom in ways that increase their cultural capital. Accordingly, community members often lay claim to an extensive knowledge of this musical tradition, engage in didactic and proselytizing practices, and have transformed the blues idiom itself into an object of "high" culture. This study concludes with an examination of those sociocultural aspects from the perspective of politics, distinguishing in turn: a politics of access to the means of performance that reveals shifting patterns of conflict and cooperation among performers; a politics of status, in which the norm of authenticity contends with the exigencies of commercial success; and a politics of stance, in which blues music serves as a rudder for individuals negotiating their way in a turbulent society shrouded in uncertainties. The research presented here has been based on field work—conducted in the spring and autumn of 1998, and the summers of 1999, 2000, and 2001—that involved attending scores of performances, conversing casually with musicians and fans, and conducting some forty-three interviews with performers, blues aficionados, and others, such as promoters and critics, who are concerned with the blues.[6]

SETTING AND SIGNIFICANCE

Although certain varieties of blues music have been performed in Russia since the 1970s, it was not until the end of the Communist epoch that blues became a distinct and broadly recognizable musical genre in the country. Repression and censorship partially accounted for Russia's rather late reception of the music. However, of perhaps greater moment was the dominant presence of rock'n'roll on the Soviet soundscape.[7] As a music of youth rebellion and protest drawing on subversive associations with an idealized and much valorized "West," the rock movement channeled the energies of many millions of adherents into a cultural struggle against the officially proclaimed "Soviet way of life" and, of course, against the restrictions, pretensions, and hypocrisy connected to it in the social consciousness. The rock-based, British variety of blues music performed by a few groups in those years was seamlessly connected to the youth subculture of rock'n'roll. Despite the efforts of the authorities to suppress and, later, to coopt and contain it,[8] by the mid-1980s some 160,000

[6]All interviews cited in this article were conducted by the author. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

[7]As S. Frederick Starr has observed, by the early 1970s rock had replaced jazz as the country's leading alternative music. Starr's history of jazz in the USSR also provides some intriguing parallels to the development of blues in the post-Communist period, especially with respect to audience composition, enthusiasts' tendency to regard the music as an expression of personal freedom, and the reversal of status markers assigned to the music (from "low" to "high" culture). See Starr's *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1983). On the topic of jazz in the USSR see also William Minor, *Unzipped Souls: A Jazz Journey through the Soviet Union* (Philadelphia, 1995); and Leo Fei, ed., *Russian Jazz: A New Identity* (London, 1985).

[8]On the history of rock'n'roll in the USSR see Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: A True Story of Rock in Russia* (London, 1987); Timothy Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford, 1990); Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Boulder, CO, 1994); and Thomas Cushman, *Notes From Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia* (Albany, NY, 1995).

groups were performing rock in the Soviet Union.[9] The demise of the USSR was coextensive with the disintegration of this rock movement. Concomitantly, it opened a cultural space for blues.

One aspect of that space was physical: venues in which to perform. Moscow, where a thriving nightclub economy took root in communism's aftermath, led the way in this respect. By the mid-1990s, some forty bands were performing one or another variety of blues music in dozens of clubs, from fashionable nightspots that seemed directly plucked from, say, New York or Paris, to low-end joints with a rough-and-tumble atmosphere. Although the financial crash of August 1998 severely pruned Moscow's burgeoning blues scene, it by no means eradicated it. Moreover, outside the capital, blues has marked steady progress. By the end of the 1990s, some ten blues bands were playing in St. Petersburg's clubs, while many large cities have become home to at least one regularly performing blues group.

One of the appeals of blues has historically been associated with the music's stoic posture amidst inhospitable social surroundings. In this respect, as a number of respondents have remarked, there appears to be a particular affinity between the mood and messages encoded in the music and the conditions confronting individuals in contemporary Russia. The social dislocation and chaos attending the post-Communist transformation would be readily visible in the mass search for simple solutions and quick fixes, out of which armies of bunco artists and crackpot cults have been making fortunes large and small.[10] In Moscow alone, the number of "healers" and assorted purveyors of the black arts numbered around fifty thousand by the end of the 1990s.[11] The "disintegration of certainties" that Ulrich Beck has identified as the individual counterpoint to the socioeconomic process of globalization, along with the concomitant tendency among individuals to find and to invent new sources of meaning in, and explanations for, their lives, would be represented in Russia in particularly robust fashion.[12]

In order to catch a glimpse of this interplay in Russia between a jumbled social reality and the desire to make meaning, consider the text of a handbill advertising a blues performance in St. Petersburg. In the original, the entire text is in Russian with the exception of two key signifiers—the name of the club ("Blues on the Corner") and the name of the band ("Belinov Blues Band")—which appear in English. One reading of this use of English would be that it signals the presence of valorized cultural products associated with the West: the club, the band, the blues. Another would understand the use of English as a code signaling to the reader just what types of people—"cultured ones"—would be welcome at this event.[13] However, a third reading of this text—in no way opposed to the other two—might

[9]Sabrina Petra Ramet, Sergei Zamascikov, and Robert Bird, "The Soviet Rock Scene," in *Rocking the State*, 181.

[10]See Eliot Borenstein, "Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama," and idem, "Suspending Disbelief: Cults and Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia," both in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Barker (Durham, NC, 1999), 49–75 and 437–62, respectively.

[11]Oleg Pachenkov, "Nekotorye aspekty deiatel'nosti sovremennykh rossiiskikh 'tselitelei,'" (St. Petersburg's Center for Independent Social Research, 1998), 1.

[12]Ulrich Beck, "The Reinvention of Politics," in *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash (Cambridge, England, 1994), 14.

[13]Aleksandr Tsar'kov, the former director of Moscow's Arbat Blues Club, noted in an interview with the author that his establishment regularly employed English in its advertisements in order to discourage the "wrong" clientele from attending (16 August 2001).

see in it a defocusing of the Russian context which teems with that uncertainty referenced by Beck. The physical location is a large new building, the International Center for Business Collaboration (a name that provides an official representation of the marketizing economy, but one that most Russians would likely interpret as the place where large-scale swindles occur), that is located on the Square of the Proletarian Dictatorship, itself standing opposite to a grand religious edifice, Smolnyi Cathedral, whose adjoining buildings for some seven decades had housed the city's Communist party headquarters and, later, the office of the city's mayor (more swindles there). Moreover, we can note the rather stilted prose—"Esteemed ladies and gentlemen! ... is happy to congratulate you and to share your company..."—employed to invite would-be patrons. These are rather stock expressions in Russia today, but they are rooted in the past. Above all, that past signifies "Soviet" as the particular holiday being marked, International Women's Day, would readily indicate.

5 March 1999
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR BUSINESS COLLABORATION
Club "BLUES ON THE CORNER"
Esteemed ladies and gentlemen!
St. Petersburg's best blues group
"BELINOV BLUES BAND"
is happy to congratulate you and to share
your company on the eve of International Women's Day
Concert begins at 19.00
Admission is free
Address: Square of the Proletarian Dictatorship, number 6
Second floor (opposite Smolnyi Cathedral)

In the context of this collection of discordant signifiers, "blues" appears as a sign distancing—as the English language in the handbill would suggest—the subject from his surroundings. The idea of blues thus represents an accessible enclave ("on the corner") situated at one remove from layers of the past and present that are referenced as matters of fact in the handbill. Accordingly, the signifiers at play, here, do not deny or negate the surroundings; they instead place the individual squarely within them while simultaneously providing a certain distance from them. It would be in the space thus created that community can form and identity can be constructed.

A number of respondents directly addressed this interplay between the blues idiom and Russia's unsettled social situation. Aleksei Agranovskii, both a biologist at Moscow State University and leader of the blues band, Chernyi khleb (Black Bread), raised the question:

> Why has blues music come to Russia? Well, what we've got in Russia now is just the same thing that existed in the United States when blues first appeared. A big element here is frustration. There are a lot of Russians who feel that they've actually become different people now that the Soviet Union no longer exists. They feel they've become Negroes. Yesterday they were slaves and our forebearers were slaves, too, for many years. People actually feel this. Now what have we got? Well, our freedom, you might say, along with a host of other problems in which

> money always seems to figure. Blues is a way to surmount the hang-ups and complexes associated with all that. It is a music that expresses instability and expresses ways in which one can deal with it.[14]

Kolia Gruzev, a young guitarist with St. Petersburg's Soul Power Band, indexed the general turbulence surrounding performers—and the creative impulses that it occasions—in his remarks that

> in the old times, Pushkin created in a bad political situation. The Decembrists and the Silver Age poets were always in a real bad situation. Now is really a strong period for us. Nobody knows what is going to happen and it's a real good time to create things. And you've got a certain freedom because you don't know what is going to happen. And we have to adapt. And when you do that all the time, you stop thinking about difficulties. Your "immune system" helps you to react to these difficulties, helps you not to pay attention to them. Musicians are very special people in this respect. [We can't earn a decent living and] so we are not satisfied with our roles [but] there's no way to stop. Like in [rushing] water, you're being dragged along by it.[15]

Similarly, Iaroslav Sukhov, an artist and blues-lover, would be speaking for many Russians by noting that

> blues music began to be socially more appreciated after our revolution, after liberation from communism, because we learnt that the machine is different but the oppression remains. Simply different levers are used, now more economic levers as opposed to the physical ones in the past. And it happens that you find much more resonance in the blues to this kind of life. ... It makes things much more transparent. I find it very attractive because you are chopped down by the crowd in the kind of protest associated with rock'n'roll [during communism's final years]. But in blues you remain yourself.[16]

SOCIAL RELATIONS

Sukhov's notion of "remaining yourself" under altered circumstances speaks immediately to the appropriation of the blues idiom as a focus for both personal and communal identities. In this respect, it is useful to apply Michel Foucault's concept of genealogies—which links social adaptation to a process in which elements of the past have been recombined in new ways, thus enabling a reconstruction of selves and the creation of new communities—and to consider the ways in which aspects of the Soviet past have been appropriated and modified by Russian bluesmen.[17] Of particular importance in this respect would be the continuing influence of the USSR's modal institution: the *kollektiv*. As Oleg Kharkhordin has shown,

[14]Interview with Aleksei Agranovskii (23 August 2001).

[15]Interview with Kolia Gruzev (15 July 1999).

[16]Interview with Iaroslav Sukhov (17 July 1999).

[17]Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York, 1978); idem, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (New York, 1980).

the *kollektiv* with its attendant set of practices had been confected from elements of earlier religious traditions and installed throughout Soviet society by the Communist party. The purpose was to nurture individuals in a new morality that joined individual achievement to the welfare of the immediate group and thence to the larger society in which the individual acted, promoting direct face-to-face accountability of the individual to those in his *kollektiv*. Although these attempts in the official sphere proved largely futile and often disastrous, many of the features of the workplace *kollektiv* were reproduced within circles of friendship where, in uncoerced fashion, they were instrumental in shaping both interpersonal relations and the structures of individual personalities.[18]

Today, it is often the case that a Russian bluesman will speak of his group as *nash kollektiv* (our collective). There appears to be more involved here than an unreflective naming using hold-overs from the Soviet era. Rather—and with varying degrees of success—blues bands are often organized as more than functionally specific units that perform blues music. They are regarded as creative communities that involve whole individuals in pursuit of a common purpose. Although outwardly disavowing association with the Communist past, veteran Moscow bluesman Sergei Voronov describes his band, Crossroadz, in precisely these terms.

> I don't like the word *kollektiv*. It reminds me of the Komsomol [Communist Union of Youth] in Soviet times. So we call our band a group. We are a kind of family. ... In these ten years [since we've been together] I've realized that it is better that I lead the band because I'm more involved in this music. ... But when I don't know what to do, I just say it. In this way, everyone—different musicians with different experience and skills—brings something to the group. That's why I'm not playing with other groups anymore. The main thing in my family is Crossroadz.[19]

In even greater detail, some of the members of St. Petersburg's Big Blues Revival (BBR) commented on their experience of forming a musical *kollektiv*.

> Sasha Rozhdestvenskii: You do have in this group the idea of an organic unity. I play pure blues and another member prefers bluegrass and another likes funk, and so forth. As a result, the internal makeup of this *kollektiv* is complex, and therefore it has life, especially as long as our individual directions are interesting for others. ... We are already in our second year and no one has left, no one else has joined. We came to the realization that it has to be just this way. We can't be seven or five, we must be six. In part, this is due to the fact that there are certain niches already occupied in this town with respect to blues. ... So, when we came along we realized that we had to do something different. Sergei [Starodubtsev's] mandolin is part of that effort to establish our own sound. More than once, comrades have come up to me and asked, "What kind of blues is this? With a mandolin?" Well, that's just it. This is our blues band. It has a mandolin.
>
> Sergei Starodubtsev: Our group is a *kollektiv* in the full sense. I am not a blues musician, I play country. But I play in a blues band because of the people in it and

[18]Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia* (Berkeley, 1999).
[19]Interview with Sergei Voronov (18 July 2000).

> the blend of sounds that we get. ... We have just come back from the road. Our purpose was to make money. But there is a distinction here between the *kollektiv* that we have and some *popsa* band [a highly commercialized Russian pop group]. For the *popsa* band, the money is the only thing. For our *kollektiv*, there are other, more human aspects.
>
> SASHA SUVOROV: But it's more than that. We argue. We argue over the music. One person tells another, "You shouldn't play it that way, I'll show you how to do it." And musicians don't always like to hear that. We sometimes verbally abuse one another. But our relationships are such that it never matters, at least for very long.[20]

This notion of unity-in-diversity has been underscored by Boris Bulkin—a Moscow guitarist who began playing blues in the 1980s and now leads Stainless Blues Band—who likened it to the ditty, "'Swan, crab, and pike,' which stands for having various vectors: the pike stays in the river while the swan flies into the sky and the crab moves onto the land. Stainless Blues Band will remind you of that very thing. We've had a lot of deep discussions about each other's strong and weak points and we are prepared to put up with our shortcomings. It's almost like a family."[21] Vadim Ivashchenko, a young guitar player from Rostov-on-Don who moved to Moscow in 2001 to join the country's hottest new blues band—Mishuris and His Swinging Orchestra—has used a different metaphor to make a general point about blues bands that he has known. "Making blues into a living thing in Russia, a country with an absolutely different culture, is no easy matter. These people are united by something that is, to a certain degree, strange or foreign. So, they construct for themselves a small world in which to live. You don't know what changes life will bring, so you continue to exist in this small world, letting in only the things that you need."[22]

On the other hand, conscious attempts to institute the *kollektiv* form have not always resulted in smooth sailing. As St. Petersburg bluesman Valerii Belinov recalls:

> As the leader of our *kollektiv*, BBB (Belinov Blues Band), I knew very well that there had to be a balance of opinions in it and that I must represent that balance. ... A *kollektiv* is a mutually free and harmonious joining of creative forces. ... Under Soviet conditions music was still very regimented and the leader counted for everything. ... So, given this context, despite my own plans for our musical *kollektiv*, the members really didn't respond. They would give no accounting of themselves. They practiced total irresponsibility. ... We decided that I would have to enforce discipline—you know, fine them for being drunk, or for an absence from rehearsal. We all agreed on this, but you can see what this meant for our plans to have a real musical *kollektiv*. ... It was one thing to agree in principle, and another to accept a fine for your lack of discipline. And with the inevitable change of personnel, that is where the Belinov Blues Band has been for the last three years: struggling along, with me holding it together, along with the inevitable number of conflicts and resentments that go with that arrangement.[23]

[20]The conversation with Sasha Rozhdestvenskii, Sergei Starodubtsev, and Sasha Suvorov was recorded on 12 July 2000.

[21]Interview with Boris Bulkin (28 August 2001).

[22]Interview with Vadim Ivashchenko (19 August 2001).

[23]Interview with Valerii Belinov (7 August 1999).

These remarks recorded during interviews would warrant the inference that Russia's blues community consists, first and foremost, of tightly knit groups of performers organized along the lines of the *kollektiv*. Looser networks of friends, fans, promoters, and blues-lovers in general radiate outward from them. As we see, below, the blues medium cements this community together but does not entirely seal its fissures. That is, the *kollektiv* form of social organization—characterized in Communist times as "group egoism"[24]—tends to furnish the social landscape with small, outwardly identical groups, each based on strong social ties. This arrangement scarcely conduces to cooperation among groups and can convert competition among them into conflicts that are often interpreted in quite personal ways. These tendencies, however, are counterbalanced by the centripetal effect exercised by the music itself as it enters the construction of individual identities and engenders a sense of community among blues-lovers.

AUTHENTICITY AND COMMUNITY

The role of music generally in engendering community and identity remains only partially understood at present. What seems to be certain, however, is that—irrespective of the actual mechanisms and processes by which it accomplishes this feat—music binds people together in important ways.[25] By accenting the individual, his troubles and desires, blues music readily enables identification with an imagined community experiencing comparable conditions and difficulties.[26] Yet, because it is a relatively unfamiliar import in today's Russia that defines a particular community, blues is often subject to close inspection and strict policing. Is this song, or a given rendition of it, actually blues, *real* blues? The answer to this question on the part of performers defines not only their music but, in certain respects, themselves. The music's authenticity thus occupies a central place in the blues community's cosmology.[27] The question appended to it can be divided into two related but separable issues. The first concerns the question of authenticity *in* the music, the way it touches something in players and fans, something that they identify as integral to their being. The second refers to the authenticity *of* the music, whether a given sound can be regarded as real blues. The general consensus that we find in the blues community on the first question is only partially reproduced on the second one.

[24]Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Kommunizm kak real'nost'* (Lausanne, 1981). Both Sarah Ashwin and Oleg Kharkhordin have called attention to the association between this pejorative characterization and what the authorities have labeled the "false collective": that is, an affective group actually animated by the members' common interests but lacking official sanction. See Sarah Ashwin, "Redefining the Collective: Russian Mineworkers in Transition," in *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. M. Burawoy and K. Verdery (Lanham, MD, 1999), 245–71; and Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, esp. 315–28.

[25]Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985), 4–19; Theodore Levin, "Dmitri Pokrovsky and the Russian Folk Music Revival Movement," in *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mark Slobin (Durham, 1996), 14–36; David Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, 1985), 233–39.

[26]Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, 1966), 75; Lee Hildebrand, "Oakland Blues, Part I: Essay," in *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West*, ed. J. DjeDje and E. Meadows (Berkeley, 1998), 108.

[27]Cushman describes a comparable situation in Leningrad's rock subculture where the standing of performers hinged directly on issues of musical and personal authenticity (*Notes From Underground*, 34–194).

Turning to that first question, we can cite a number of comments made by Russia's bluesmen and fans during interviews or in casual conversations. One comes from an acquaintance struck up in a blues club with a man named Oleg, who works as scenery director for St. Petersburg's Children's Puppet Theater. His remarks on the soulfulness of the music tap categories seminal to Russians' self-understanding: soul, and music's role in evoking it.[28]

> Some music is played with the head, some with the heart and soul. Blues is like that, it comes from the soul. It's like our bards, such as [Vladimir] Vysotskii. It's not the same, of course, but a parallel tradition. Russians like that kind of music. When I first heard blues, I thought that this is my life that is being expressed.[29]

Aleksei Kalachev, who has narrated a weekly blues program on national radio for a number of years, reports on the phone calls and letters that he receives regarding his broadcasts.

> Unexpectedly, I will hear from people who have never listened to the blues before, maybe someone sitting in prison in Siberia or someone out in Kamchatka (I just got a letter from there yesterday). A person who might be fifty years old tells me, "Good lord, all my life I thought that there was something that I lack and then I heard your show. I was immediately paralyzed by the first note." I don't want to exaggerate, but I think that this happens because blues is a great music. The emotions that have been laid into it express what people have survived. They tell a dramatic story that is similar to the history of Russians. Blues is about something authentic.[30]

For many, a personal investment in blues accents the value of authenticity. A young Moscow fan states that she likes "to watch the faces of the players [which often are contorted while playing]. It's part of the music, it shows that they do it from their hearts. Some musicians try to perform, while these guys don't care how they look and what other people think. They just play and that's the most important thing for them."[31] A Petersburg devotee engages that same point, explaining that he appreciates "blues mainly because of the way that they over-perform. It's more than improvisation. In blues, the player goes beyond himself. He achieves something that lies in the moment, not in his ordinary being or consciousness."[32] Similarly, a Petersburg journalist had this to say on the matter:

> Blues is not fashionable but durable. You should learn about it if you are serious about music rather than about following ephemeral fads. Blues is not commercial. Bluesmen are not rich and do not strive for a comfortable life, for "the European standard." For them, it is all about music. They don't even care where they play, over a warm street grate or in Carnegie Hall. Only the blues matters.[33]

[28]Dale Pesmen, *Russia and Soul: An Exploraation* (Ithaca, 2000), esp. 80–94.
[29]Conversation with Oleg, the scenery director (30 July 1999).
[30]Interview with Aleksei Kalachev (24 August 2001).
[31]Interview with Nadia Chilcote (26 July 1999).
[32]Conversation with Kirill Bykov (10 August 1999).
[33]Vladimir Kuznetsov, "Vospominaniia o bliuze, kotorogo ne bylo," *Sankt-Petersburgskie novosti* (6 July 1997).

Along these lines, seasoned bluesman and leader of Moscow's Blues Hammer Band, Mikhail Sokolov, rendered his relationship to the music in reverential terms, referring to his "interest in *sluzhenie*"—service in the religious sense of obligations to the deity—"serving a particular genre" regardless of whether there was any money in it.[34]

The second side of authenticity—because it concerns the maintenance of boundaries defining the blues community itself—represents a far more fractious issue. Nikolai Arutiunov, who has been performing blues for over twenty years, mainly as vocalist and leader of Moscow's Liga bliuza (Blues League), echoed comments frequently made in interviews by drawing the line against what many Russian bluesmen often refer to as "fake" or "false" blues. "There is such a concept as 'Russian blues,'" he remarked:

> There are even groups that consider themselves to be Russian bluesmen. But we, bluesmen, do not consider those Russian bluesmen to be real bluesmen. Because these groups like Chizh & Co. are simply Russian rock with a few elements of blues thrown in. They don't have the blues mood (*nastroieniia*), the "feeling" [in English]. So, Chizh is a good group, but not blues. They just play more blues in their sound than do other groups. We don't consider them as one of our own.[35]

Other performers pointed less to the actual content of the music than to the setting in which it is performed and, more important, the purpose for which it is played. Vovka Kozhekin, a young Moscow harmonica player, complained that "what we have been experiencing is a great profanation of this style of music on the commercial market just to make money."[36] Similarly, Vitalii Andreev, BBR's vocalist, objected to the fact that "there's a group in this town. A blues band? Now they are playing in casinos as a kind of background music, like the woman in the Hotel Astoria who plays the harp in the lobby. I think that this is a discreditation, not only of musicians, but of the music that they play."[37]

As a performer oriented toward the more traditional sound of Delta and early Chicago blues, Mikhail Sokolov confessed his chagrin at the lack of understanding that greeted his first performances of this music. "We thought right away," he explained,

> that the public would not understand this music. Well, we were right. When we started to play some songs, no one was at all involved. ... Even blues musicians who were there said, "Hey, I thought that you were supposed to be playing blues. What is this stuff you're playing?" When I played a Bukka White album for my old friend, Aleksei Belov—who is a fine blues guitar player and leader of the group Udachnoe priobretenie (A Fortunate Acquisition)—he said, "What's that? That's not blues. B. B. King is blues. Johnny Winter is blues. But that's not blues. I can't even listen to that stuff. I don't even think that the guitar has been tuned. In general, it's not even music." Such were his opinions, the opinions of a bluesman who had been playing blues on stage for thirty years.[38]

[34]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999).
[35]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).
[36]Interview with Vovka Kozhekin (16 June 2000).
[37]Interview with Vitalii Andreev (5 July 2000).
[38]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999).

In the view of Giia Dzagnidze, an outstanding blues guitarist and leader of Moscow's Modern Blues Band, the issues of authenticity *of* and *in* the blues are directly joined. "Speaking from direct experience," he maintains,

> if a person is not expressing his soul in his music, if he is just playing music technically well, we can say that this is not bad. But at the same time, it is not good. This is really the core of blues music, too. Blues is not just playing "Hootchie Cootchie Man." Rather, blues expresses what you have survived. Blues is recalling what you have survived.[39]

Along similar lines, Mikhail Sokolov has recounted an episode in which he was unexpectedly telephoned by a guitarist with whom he had played many years ago.

> This guy had moved out of Moscow and then one day in the early nineties I got a call from him saying, "Petrovich, they say that blues is now in vogue. So the boys and I have decided to play some blues. Tell me what kinds of places are available to play there. We'll practice up and we're on our way." Well, I just went limp from this conversation. These guys think that blues is real simple. Three chords. By tomorrow we'll have a whole show ready. I was just aghast at this and I asked him not to call again. He didn't understand that he had offended me so much.[40]

Sokolov's reference to his interlocutor's assumption "that blues is real simple" indexes a pivotal concept in the self-understanding of the blues community, distancing it from outsiders. Whereas the uninitiated might regard simplicity as an indication that blues can be easily mastered, Russian bluesmen insist that the opposite is actually the case. Among the many comments made during interviews, two might be cited as representative of a general consensus on this issue. The first comes from Aleksei Baryshev, leader of Vladimir's Blackmailers Blues Band:

> Rock is largely based on a pentatonic scale and includes a lot of blues phrases, and so more and more I became oriented to playing blues. Quickly, I began to discover that blues is outwardly a very simple music, but that appearance conceals a great complexity within it. It is very difficult to reproduce the full sense of blues, in particular the emotional element that it contains.[41]

The second is voiced by Sergei Mironov, bass player with BBR:

> I can say that my first reaction [to blues] was that this is very simple, primitive music, especially after the kind of jazz-rock that I had come to listen to a lot. At first, it was kind of boring [to play]. Then, after I had begun to play with Hands [Kolia Gruzev], I began to understand that this was absolutely not simple music at all. Very unsimple. And, secondly, I began to understand that this is a very deep music and that managing to play this music would be a real trip.[42]

[39]Interview with Giia Dzagnidze (18 June 2000).
[40]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999).
[41]Interview with Aleksei Baryshev (8 July 2000).
[42]Interview with Sergei Mironov (13 July 1999).

Within the blues community, then, the valence of simplicity is reversed. What outsiders regard as undemanding music that need not be taken seriously is reframed on the basis of an esoteric knowledge that valorizes the very elements that others dismiss. Initiates take an obvious pride in themselves for having unlocked this secret. The music seems simple to those who do not understand it. But we do. And it is this shared knowledge that supplies one of the bonds of community, distinguishing its members from others who might have access to the same information but who are unable to understand and appreciate it.

Style

Authenticity, socially displayed, raises the question of style. As a social concept, style, has elicited conflicting assessments. Some theorists, such as Dick Hebdige, regard subcultural style, mediated through music, dress, and argot, as "a gesture of defiance or contempt" toward the hegemony of capitalist social relations and their attendant ideology. Style functions to disrupt the taken-for-granted world with its ready-made structures in which those relations and ideology dictate the choices confronting the individual. Style draws a circle around subjects in a community "liberated" by virtue of its lived opposition to the surrounding hegemony of the prevailing order. It thus buttresses individual identity and dignity.[43] However, other theorists, sensitive to the repressive side of commodity consumption, might challenge that thesis. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, would argue that these same elements of style—music, dress, and argot—can be understood as signs that determine the "obligatory registration of individuals on the scale of status, through the mediation of their group and as a function of their relations with other groups." Moreover, he continues, "this scale is properly the social order, since the acceptance of this hierarchy of differential signs and their interiorization by the individual of signs in general (i.e., of the norms, values and social imperatives that signs are) constitute the fundamental, decisive form of social control—more so even than acquiescence to ideological norms."[44] Because style represents a symbolic opposition to capitalist social relations, it would be determined by those relations themselves. Rather than abolishing the commodity form, style would faithfully reproduce it as its putative other. Consequently, it can enter and replenish capitalism's market place of signs, whether in the form of mass-marketed gangsta rap, the down-at-the-heel look in the fashion industry, or corporate executives slapping high fives on the occasion of concluding a business deal.

Arguments advanced by either side in this debate can claim some purchase with respect to blues music and culture in post-Communist Russia. The idea of blues, and images related thereto, have been pressed into service by the advertising industry. Incongruously, the word has appeared prominently in such things as magazine advertisements hawking a new line of office furniture. Images—such as the stud-like figure in leather jacket, blowing blues on his harp as he thumbs a ride—have been featured in TV ad campaigns imploring Russians to use contraceptives. Indeed, American movies such as *The Blues Brothers* or *From Dusk Till*

[43]Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979), 3–19, 90–114, and esp. 3; Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Chicago, 1994), 202–17.

[44]Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, 1981), 68.

Dawn have provided images of blues style and have served as access points to blues music for many Russians. In particular, the impact of the film *Crossroads*—which combines a sense of freewheeling adventure with a young aesthete's encounter with blues culture and a music that he eventually masters through fierce determination—often surfaced in interviews.[45]

On the other hand, a cursory perusal of a blues performance in Russia would likely indicate the absence of any outward markers of style, such as clothing or speech. In the overwhelming majority of cases, blues bands are completely indistinguishable from other collections of (male) persons by virtue of, say, their dress or hair length. Likewise, there seems to be no particular dialect setting members of the blues community apart from others in society. These proclivities stand in marked contrast to Russia's rockabilly subculture in which more or less uniform manifestations of style—clothing, hair-dos, motorcycles, and so forth—are prominently displayed.

Some of the more commercially successful bluesmen count this as a debit. Nikolai Arutiunov, for instance, contrasts rockabilly, heavy metal, and reggae with blues "for which no such style is visible. And that," he continues,

> is for us a minus because young people are first interested by what is visible, they are attracted by what can be seen. ... Through these external aspects they are able to pursue and find something deeper, and I've always campaigned for that kind of thing among bluesmen. ... But we don't develop any particular style and I think that this is a big shortcoming. ... We must be interesting people, we must look good. Take, for instance, Stevie Ray Vaughn. He would be a good example for everyone to follow.[46]

His colleague, Mikhail Sokolov, would agree, arguing that

> I could work without my hat. I'm not embarrassed by my balding head. But inasmuch as I've already created this kind of image with my hat, I work with it on even when it is very hot and I have to carry a towel to mop up the sweat. That is because people can't really sort out the blues for themselves. Usually, they are more involved with the show. That is, a person will say, "Look how this guy plays! He wears this black hat and he's got a big beard and he plays harmonica." So, it's all the elements together that provide this show that seems to be the most attractive thing for most people. ... If I were able to juggle while I played harmonica, then I would do that.[47]

But these appear to be minority views. Most bluesmen regard style as an aspect of that very sense of individuality that is celebrated in blues music. Aleksei Agranovskii, for instance, regards outward manifestations of style as indicative of an absence of content.

> When you see these guys come out on stage with the dark glasses and big hats, I am already thinking that this is going to be boring. I don't have in mind here, say,

[45]Vania Zhuk, a young Petersburg guitarist who performs regularly with Vovka Kozhekin, referred to *Crossroads* as "a milestone for every bluesman in Russia, especially of this [the younger] generation" (29 June 2000).

[46]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).

[47]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999).

> John Lee Hooker—to me, he is very interesting. But these people I'm talking about, are they expressing themselves or something else? And if it's not themselves, then it's going to be boring. They are just beating something with a sausage. It's actually funny.[48]

Likewise, Kolia Gruzev sees in these accouterments a subversion of the idiom itself.

> Some people need to be bluesmen. They need to wear hats. It comes from a couple of movies: *The Blues Brothers*, which is fake, sure, and *Crossroads*, which is closer [to the matter] but too romantic. ... But sometimes people try to be like that. I tried to be like that for awhile, but it's not the goal itself. ... I love the way they [American bluesmen] look and what they do, but we are just different people, and it doesn't have any influence on the music. ... Your style and your music are all the same. [Blues] style means to be yourself.[49]

In part, this controversy over style reflects different emphases present in the blues community: one, to promote the music by putting on an eye-catching show; the other, to express in one's outward appearance that same individuality that is encoded in blues music. Inasmuch as the value placed on authenticity can impede efforts to popularize the music, the issue of style reflects a normative divide within the community itself. Using categories developed by Pierre Bourdieu, we can conceptualize this divide by positing that some performers follow a strategy of distinguishing themselves by accumulating commercial capital—both money and a public following—while others tack toward the accumulation of cultural capital by performing blues in a way that coincides with that same individuality that constitutes part of its appeal.[50] Further, this distinction owes something to place. The outward features of style seem to be best represented among certain Moscow bluesmen whose levels of commercial success—albeit modest—put them in a league far removed from that of their impecunious counterparts elsewhere in the country. Access to commercial capital distinguishes the Moscow blues scene and thus, as we see below, represents a palpable division in Russia's blues community. However, while noting the discord attending the question of style, we are again reminded of the centripetal pull of the music associated with it. In the words of Nikolai Arutiunov, himself an advocate for the use of visible markers:

> We have different subgroups in our society, different musical societies. We have, let's say, Metalica, or Grunge. You will meet someone like that and ask what kind of music he likes and that person will tell you, "I like Grunge," or "I like Metal." And the reply is something along the lines of, "Well, you're a fine person but you're not my brother. I like to listen to the blues." And you meet another person and you say, "What music do you listen to?" And he might say, "The Rolling Stones, John Mayall, Leadbelly, Otis Spann." You think right away, "You're my brother."[51]

[48]Interview with Aleksei Agranovskii (23 August 2001).

[49]Interview with Kolia Gruzev (15 July 1999).

[50]Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, England, 1984); idem, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. R. Johnson (New York, 1993); idem, *In Other Words* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

[51]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).

Language

Adherence to musical canon has meant that blues in Russia, with very few exceptions, is sung in English. This preference for a foreign language over the native one probably has something to do with the notion of a valorized Western import enhancing the status of local performers and consumers of the music. It may also have resulted from the prehistory of blues in Russia, when the music was a little-differentiated appendage of rock'n'roll. A rock-alloyed blues with original lyrics had been performed in Russian during the late Communist period, but the use of English for blues music thereafter helped to distinguish it as something separate from rock. This tendency was reinforced by communism's collapse and, with it, the devaluation of protest songs, making the words themselves less central to the music's appeal. But, perhaps most important, the issue of language is inherently bound up with questions of performance: whether the music sounds authentic in a given language.[52] As such, two other aspects of vocalizing seem to carry greater explanatory weight. The first concerns the commitment evinced by Russian bluesmen to a faithful reproduction of the music. This would be especially true for the first generation of performers who discovered blues before it had become at all popular. For instance, in the role of host for a weekly program—"Simply Blues"—that ran on the NTV-plus cable network for about three months in winter 1997, Mikhail Sokolov answered a telephone caller's question by remarking that the reason for singing in English is "to preserve tradition. That is the main reason, to copy the foreign tradition and to master it. When we have mastered the English, then we shall create the Russian."

The second factor concerns the relative unsuitability of Russian—due largely to its grammatical complexity and the plethora of polysyllabic words—to the standard blues verse.[53] As Petersburg bass player and vocalist Sergei Semenov has put it, "We have to perform in English because the melodic structures correspond to the English language. ... If you were singing in Russian, then the language would correspond more to Russian folk sounds and the timbre of the music would be changed."[54] Alternatively, in the view of Sasha Suvorov, "if you sing blues in Russian, it comes across very strange. ... The words and the dynamics of the phrasing are totally different in Russian and English. The rhythms of the languages are different."[55]

Does it matter for the listener that the music is performed in English? To a certain extent it does. The compactness of blues lyrics—especially the element of double-voicing in which signification is registered and negated in a single act—would be largely lost on an audience with little or no command of the language.[56] But Russians, as they are like to do in

[52]A comparable issue of language in the instance of Mexican rock'n'roll is discussed at length by Eric Zolov in *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley, 1999), 9–14, 17–34, 65–72, 93–99, 118–31, 185–87.

[53]Tony Mitchell, *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania* (London, 1996), 37.

[54]Interview with Sergei Semenov (31 July 1999).

[55]Interview with Sasha Suvorov (5 July 1999).

[56]Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, 2d ed. (San Francisco, 1996), esp. 194–97. Double-voicing in both the Afro-American and Russian traditions is discussed in Dale Peterson, *Up From Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham, NC, 2000), esp. 108–24 and 186–99.

many endeavors, find ways of compensating. As a young St. Petersburg guitarist, Volodia Rusinov, has remarked, "Russians are used to listening to music in unintelligible foreign languages. With blues, it's just the same."[57] Oleg, our scenery director from St. Petersburg, speaks little English, but enough, he says, to catch the gist of most songs.[58] Iaroslav Sukhov feels that "in blues the music itself does the talking and that is completely sufficient," while Sergei Starodubtsev dismisses the import of the language issue, arguing that "people are making music before they can talk."[59] From the other end of the microphone, Petersburg blues singer Inessa Kataeva has sought to turn the language barrier into an advantage.

> Just to survive this life and its problems, well, it comes out in the music that I sing. I really enjoy improvising, and it has always been difficult to do that in a foreign language. However, in blues I can vocalize around the melody and, even though it's in English, I don't feel uncomfortable about that. ... So, I try to work those problems into my singing and to discuss them musically. ... [Sometimes] I'm worried that I'm not singing the words correctly, because I don't understand many of the texts that I sing. And there are times when I forget the words entirely. So what do I do then? Well, I just keep going and hope that I get lucky. And sometimes it turns out better. They tell me afterwards: "That was great the way you sang that song." But it was only because I was improvising completely.[60]

There have been some attempts at rendering blues in Russian. Recorded versions have shown mixed results: some successful, others, less so.[61] The trick seems to involve recasting English language texts into sonorously comparable Russian ones. In this respect Nikolai Arutiunov describes a painstaking, laborious process that for a long while had produced only *kasha* (porridge).[62] "I try to write blues in Russian," he explains,

> that actually has a kind of English language feel to it. It is very difficult to work Russian words into a blues text. They are quite a bit longer than English ones. I use the help of various poets. They don't understand blues rhythm or the blues sense, but they help me because I am not really equipped to be a composer myself. It is very complicated work to get this sound so that the music itself is a bit like English.[63]

Similarly, Valerii Belinov has collaborated with a poet in order to translate English-language texts into Russian by radically changing the surface content of narratives, inserting Russian expressions that retain the proper rhythm and meter, thereby evoking the same mood as the original but often on the basis of quite different tropes and images. The resulting sound is unmistakably blues, yet its unusual timbre startles the ear expecting to hear an English lyric but encountering a fully fluid Russian one.

[57]Interview with Volodia Rusinov (28 June 2000).

[58]Conversation with Oleg, scenery director (30 July 1999).

[59]Interview with Iaroslav Sukhov (17 July 1999); interview with Sergei Starodubtsev (12 July 2000).

[60]Interview with Inessa Kataeva (4 August 1999).

[61]For examples of successful and less successful recordings see, respectively, Dikii med, *Vesel'aia vdova* (Munich and Moscow: Interus International Feelee Records, 1993); and Aura, *Russkii bliuz* (Moscow: self-produced, 1994).

[62]Nikolai Arutiunov, interviewed by Andrei Bol'shakov, *Music Box*, 1997, no. 1:6–10.

[63]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).

Preachin' the Blues

The stress placed on authenticity in the blues community intersects with longstanding Russian cultural proclivities to regard the surrounding society as in some way degenerate, fallen, morally threatened and, thus, in need of enlightenment and salvation.[64] This proclivity is reinforced by the tendency to perceive the larger society through the prism of family relations, a tendency by no means unique to Russia but one that appears to be especially pronounced there.[65] Indeed, as Aleksandr Arinin has pointed out, the "nation as family" metaphor in Russian social consciousness derives much of its influence on thought and perception from the very fact that it is so deeply embedded in everyday thinking that it has become naturalized and escapes critical attention.[66] Like others of their number in the intelligentsia—past and present—many Russian bluesmen evince a responsibility toward the family/nation, seeing it as their charge to perfect this music that so inspires them and to bring it to their unenlightened brothers and sisters.[67]

There seems to be a common opinion, in this respect, that were blues music featured more on radio and television, then its popularity would expand geometrically. As Mikhail Sokolov remarked, "Unfortunately, 90 percent of the people in Russia use that which they have been given on television and radio and no more. They don't even think about the possibility that there are more interesting musical directions to be explored."[68] Vladimir Berezin, a guitarist with Petersburg's The Way, likewise believes that the issue is one of exposure:

> Unfortunately, no one propagandizes the blues in this country. You won't see anything about the blues on television. And the common masses are left out of this music because it is not being popularized or propagandized. If you put Stevie Ray Vaughn's clips [music videos] on TV, then the people (*narod*) would react to this very positively.[69]

[64]Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture* (Cambridge, England, 1992) 6–12; Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and The Individual in Russia*; Svetlana Boym, *Common Places* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), esp. 41–88.

[65]Katherine Verdery has described the "nation as family" phenomenon in contemporary Romania in *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996), 62–81, esp. 64. George Lakoff has produced a comparable and much ramified study of the family metaphor in U.S. politics in *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know and Liberals Don't* (Chicago, 1996). And, finally, for this phenomenon in the Russian context see Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika* (Ithaca, 1997).

[66]Aleksandr Arinin, "Partnerskie otnosheniia vlasti i obshchestva," *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (28 October 1999).

[67]With respect to music in particular, this inclination to spread enlightenment in the postrevolutionary period was the *raison d'être* of journals such as *Muzyka i revoliutsiia* and *Proletarskoi muzykant*. In the 1920s and early 1930s, a mass movement for proletarian music was organized to struggle against the "bourgeois" music associated with the period of the New Economic Policy (the *popsa* of the day) and to bring authentically "proletarian" music to the masses. An outline of the goals, program, and cadres organization of this movement appeared in L. Lebedinskii, "Dvizhenie proletarskoi muzyki dolzhno stat' dvizhenie massovym," *Proletarskoi muzykant*, 1930, no. 7:5–10. See also Amy Nelson, "The Struggle for Proletarian Music: RAPM and the Cultural Revolution," *Slavic Review* 59 (Spring 2000): 101–32.

[68]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999)

[69]Interview with Vladimir Berezin (31 July 1999).

Accordingly, a number of bluesmen regard it as their obligation "to open people's eyes," in the words of music magazine editor, Aleksandr Dolgov.[70] "There is no question here," remarks Vitalii Andreev, "that the audience must be brought up, nurtured."[71] Often, this obligation is expressed in very personal terms. Vovka Kozhekin reports that:

> I see myself with this task, namely, to do my best to acquaint the country with this part of world culture, the blues, and perhaps also to try to create something of the blues on Russian soil. Above all, for me this is an attempt to raise the general cultural level of the country. And personally, because of the way that culture has lagged so much in this country, it makes it simply hard to live [here]. I want people to know and to love what I know and love.[72]

The dramaturgy of a typical blues concert in Russia is apt to contain a didactic moment in this respect. Sometimes it is confined to the introduction of the song about to be played, identifying (not always correctly) in somber and serious tones the individual who wrote it. Because the audience is unlikely to place the name of, say, Willie Dixon or Lowell Fulson, the transfer of information that occurs in these episodes actually seems to involve a subtextual statement to the effect that: "This is serious music; we know about it; you should listen to it and learn about it too." At other times, the audience is treated to brief lectures "to instruct them about the blues that they're hearing."[73] That format was consistently employed throughout the three-month run of the television program, "Simply Blues." Learned discussions about the music, explaining one or another of its sources or facets, would alternate with live performances in the studio. The agenda here was clear: to educate as well as to entertain. This format also appears on radio programs devoted to blues music such as those narrated by Andrei Evdokimov ("All That Blues," Radio Ekho Moskvy), Aleksei Kalachev ("Doctor Blues," Radio Rossiia) and Alik Kasparov ("Blues Bag," broadcast in the mid-nineties on Radio SNC). Some of the content of these radio programs—especially the remarks of, and replies to, telephone callers—gets recycled as articles in music magazines,[74] along with a steady stream of pieces profiling American and British blues artists.[75]

The impulse to proselytize which informs the identity of most bluesmen is also associated with the music's capacity to invert social hierarchies by including in performance the representation of socially marginalized elements.[76] Thus, on one hand, a musical form stemming from "low" culture has been imported into the country and received by members of the intelligentsia who reverse the valence of its status markers, transforming it into an object to be appreciated by discerning and sophisticated people. On the other, those who do not

[70]Interview with Aleksandr Dolgov (26 July 2000).

[71]Interview with Vitalii Andreev (13 July 1999).

[72]Interview with Vovka Kozhekin (16 June 2000).

[73]Kuznetzov, "Vospominaniia o bliuze, kotorogo ne bylo."

[74]Aleksei Kalachev, "Blue Note," *Music Box*, 1997, no. 2:80.

[75]A sample of these would include Andrei Evdokimov, "Buddy Guy," *Music Box*, 1998, no. 1:10, 19; idem, "O, shchastlivchik," ibid., 1999, no. 3:86–87; Nikolai Meinert, "Dzhon Meiell, kotoryi vsiu zhizn' znal, chto delaet," ibid, 1998, no. 1:6–8; and Vladimir Elbaev and Andrei Evdokimov, "Bliuz rodom iz Del'ty," *Audio magazin*, 1999, no. 3:127–29.

[76]Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin Texas* (Hanover, NH, 1994), 34–37.

participate in the consumption of this music are themselves included in it as an absence, as that great potential audience who would appreciate the blues if only they had been informed ("enlightened") about it. This approach is made all the more seductive because of traces of "low" culture that remain in the music, despite its status inversion. As an especially earthy music, blues evokes a sense of the unruly world surrounding those educated, young middle-class males who constitute its principal constituency.[77] To many members of the blues community, then, the question seems elementary: Would not ordinary people also enjoy this music that so much speaks about their lives? In the following section, we return to the implications of this question.

A related element in this proselytizing posture would involve opposition to the reigning mass-music genre: *popsa*. During interviews, members of the blues community offered explanations for the popular success of this music, but most explanations seem to be variations on the theme of improper nurturing. For instance, Alla Gladkikh, a Petersburg musician and former promoter, claimed that the management of the rock club with which she had been associated was "guilty" of fostering *popsa*. "We did nothing to advance the musical upbringing" of the club's young patrons, she argued, "we just put in the music that they wanted to hear, and we did it just for the money."[78] Mikhail Sokolov directed the blame at television and radio, insisting that bribery and payola in the mass media have degraded their musical fare and produced a steady stream of "crap information that has cost us a lot of our audience."[79] Similarly, Vovka Kozhekin spoke of *popsa* as a music foisted on the public by former functionaries in the Communist party. They saw lucrative opportunities in this music, he observed,

> because it doesn't require any mastery whatsoever. The words practically don't matter; everything about the rhythm and melody are completely standardized. It is precisely for this reason that if we are going to move our country musically to the standards of Europe and America, then we have to take a strong social position against our own system of show business. ... I guess you might say that any musical attempt is simultaneously a struggle against *popsa*.[80]

If the norm of authenticity constructs the boundary of the blues community, then proselytizing and opposition to *popsa* both reinforce it while simultaneously mediating the community's relations with the surrounding world. These practices appear to depend on a background understanding that society has been victimized by a degraded mass culture that leaves most people ignorant of "real music." As such, uninformed others are integral to the community's self-concept: we struggle against the forces of crass commercialism to bring "real music," blues, to them. This aspect of subcultural identity, then, tends to blur the line of community/other distinctions by overlaying the category of difference with an ample measure of similarity, captured in the notion that others would appreciate our music too, if

[77]Aleksei Kalachev, "Prikliucheniia bliuza," *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (2 June 1997).
[78]Interview with Alla Gladkikh (16 July 2000).
[79]Interview with Mikhail Sokolov (23 July 1999).
[80]Interview with Vovka Kozhekin (16 June 2000).

they were only exposed to it properly. In short, the Russian blues identity is linked to a conception of community whose putative potential for growth tomorrow informs the significance of its practices today.

POLITICS

We conclude this study with a few words on the political implications of the foregoing analysis. Here our attention turns first to the mundane issue of access to the means of performance—the struggle to get club bookings and the chance to play—and the divisive influence of the *kollektiv* in this regard. Second, we examine the conflict obtaining in the blues community's normative structure that is expressed in the authorized practices of insuring authenticity and making the music available to an uninitiated public who count as potential community members. Finally, we examine a politics of culture that informs relations between the community and the larger society.

Turning to the first of these matters, a major distinction can be drawn here—as is true of so many things in Russia—between Moscow and the remainder of the country. At the present time, about a dozen clubs in Moscow continue to feature blues music. Each of them relies on an "artistic director" to assist in, if not entirely manage, bookings. Often these artistic directors are themselves bluesmen, usually the leaders of their respective bands. Consequently, the organization of blues performances around the city has generally transpired through a network of informal relations in which reciprocity obtains: You book us in your club and I'll book you in mine. Naturally, this pattern has made for a certain bonding among Moscow groups represented in the network as well as for a certain resentment among outsiders who sometimes speak of this arrangement as consisting of "clans," "a little mafia," or a "holding company."[81]

The tendency among many Moscow bluesmen—especially inasmuch as they are ensconced at the geographical center of Russia's blues community—is to ignore developments on the periphery. This was apparent during a number of interviews in which Muscovites claimed no knowledge of one or another blues band performing in other cities. A Petersburger complained that when "I go to Moscow to play a concert, I call around all over town telling other musicians about it. Do you think that they would come to listen to me? None of them, or maybe one. They think that they are the great musicians of Moscow who do not have time for someone from Petersburg."[82]

To some extent, the social distance between Moscow bluesmen and their counterparts elsewhere in Russia reflects an economic division. Financial rewards are many times greater for those fortunate enough to play the blues in Moscow. According to the view from St. Petersburg:

> In Moscow, there is so much money. And here it is just the opposite, we play concerts for laughable sums. Yesterday we played a concert for ten dollars apiece.

[81]See, respectively, interview with Aleksei Baryshev (8 July 2000); interview with Vovka Kozhekin (16 June 2000); and interview with Kolia Gruzev (15 July 1999).

[82]Interview with Valerii Belinov (13 April 1998).

> That's enough [the total receipts] maybe to buy a harmonica. As a matter of fact, we blew out a harmonica yesterday, so we will have to use that money to buy a new one.[83]

And from that of the provinces:

> There is this expression: "Moscow is the state of the state." They are only concerned with themselves [there] and they don't pay much attention to the provinces. For instance, there is a lot going on in Vladimir that people in Moscow just don't know about. Because Moscow groups are established and have set rates of pay, when I write a Moscow band to come to Vladimir for a concert they say: "What kind of money?" And when I tell them, they say that they can only play for five times that much. When it comes to blues bands in other regions ... their problems are just like ours. We all speak the same language. They don't share the Moscow mentality which seems to revolve around money.[84]

These views outwardly concern the matter of privilege. They express the notion that Moscow bluesmen enjoy a special access to the means of performance and are relunctant to share it with others. But as factual as such claims appear to be, they also might mask another factor, the influence of the *kollektiv* form of social organization. The countermovement to the centripetal pull of the *kollektiv* would be the varying shades of otherness falling on those outside it. When the Moscow/provinces distinction is under discussion, Moscow assumes the part of the other and non-Moscow groups become "like us." However, an examination of the relations among blues bands in a given city would show that equivalent distinctions often obtain among them. These are reflected as relative indifference. Some established performers in St. Petersburg, for example, mentioned in interviews that they had no knowledge of certain young bluesmen who had been playing around town for years. Just as I found myself during interviews in Moscow informing bluesmen of the names and talents of certain Petersburg performers unknown to them, so on another occasion in St. Petersburg I found myself describing various top players and bands in Moscow about whom my interlocutors were equally unaware. The matter of indifference toward others involved with the same pursuit reached comic proportions in Petersburg in the spring of 2000 when, on the same day (27 May), two blues festivals—each named for Robert Johnson—were mounted at separate locations by organizers who were completely ignorant of what their counterparts were perpetrating in another part of the city.

The second aspect of politics in the blues community—the normative conflict between authenticity and the practical implications of popularizing the music—can be represented in one respect as a difference in the strategies of performers: one aimed at shoring up cultural capital, the other at acquiring the commercial capital associated with public recognition. However, these differing strategic orientations take on added significance when we place them in the specific context of the blues idiom as an identity construct. As Clyde Woods has suggested, blues from its inception has represented a "counternarrative of the American

[83]Interview with Vitalii Andreev (13 July 1999).

[84]Interview with Aleksei Makarov, manager of Vladimir's Blackmailers' Blues Band (8 July 2000).

dream" and has thus become an international idiom, travelling on the underside of the process of globalization that has brought features of American commercial culture to societies around the world.[85] Blues interrogates that culture; it voices the laments and complaints of those who have been crushed by it; it disdains submission to it. In the Russian context, then, adoption of the blues idiom would place one in a community distinguished from others in two important ways. On one hand, as we have noted, blues is valorized as a Western import setting those in the community invidiously apart from uncomprehending others. On the other, this *particular import* has nothing in common with the vulgar materialism practiced by the country's *noveaux riches* as their way of being Western. Blues is thus marked as both a Western cultural form and, simultaneously, as the bad conscience of actually existing Westernization. Consequently, any diminution of the music's authenticity for the sake of its popularity would pose a threat to identity, undermining, as it were, the force of the counternarrative and risking association with the hegemonic form of Western commercialism: pop.

An episode that occurred during a performance of Russia's most popular blues band—Blues Cousins—in a Moscow nightclub in the summer of 2001 would bring this issue into sharp relief. I sat at a stage-side table with two prominent members of the country's blues community who recounted the efforts of the group's leader, Levan Lomidze, to bring the music to a wider audience. They praised him extensively for this and argued that he was showing the way forward for all Russian bluesmen. Blues Cousins were playing a room packed with some two hundred individuals, the great majority of whom appeared to be "middle class." When the music commenced, an unspoken question seemed to hang over our conversation: In which middle class are these individuals participating tonight? Is it the one informed by genuine (blues) culture or the other one based on the consumption of commerical products (pop)? As the performance progressed, the audience exhibited its greatest enthusiasm when Lomidze played the two Beatles songs thrown in as crowd-pleasers. My companions, sitting impassively throughout the show, became somewhat irritated whenever the more popish sounds reached their ears, occasionally grousing that "this is turning into a rock concert" and "we are back ten years" as far as the authenticity of the music was concerned. Their remarks seemed to indicate dissappointment with the entire tenor of the evening, and chagrin at the fact that the middle class in that particular room did not respond in preferred ways to the performance, just as the performers were apparently remiss in catering to what was, indeed, popular.[86] Accordingly, this episode offered a practical reply to the question posed, above, in the abstract: Would not ordinary people also enjoy this music that so much speaks about their lives? Yes, they well might, but in their own way.

The final aspect of politics in the blues community concerns a related issue: the struggle for culture. In this respect, we can regard culture in a broad sense as "the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated,

[85]Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Culture in the Mississippi Delta* (New York, 1998), 167.

[86]The reactions of my companions were not lost on Lomidze. As if smarting from the silent censure of their gaze, he remarked to me after the performance: "Do you know how difficult it is to be playing and to see in the audience people who are glaring at you like that? You should know how hard it is to play the blues here in Moscow with that kind of audience."

reproduced, experienced and explored."[87] As Murray Edelman has argued, cultural products provide society with a finite number of vantages from which the political world is apprehended, assessed and, indeed, contructed.[88] Cultural is therefore political in the deepest sense. Its "meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power."[89] Members of Russia's blues community experience their activities as a struggle for culture, as many of their remarks, already presented here, would indicate. The coherence of the community itself emerges from a common endeavor to perform the blues in Russia.

The notion of cultural struggle has been imprinted in particular on the consciousness of blues musicians who had been involved with this unsanctioned music during the Communist period. Veteran Moscow bluesman, Aleksei Belov, has recalled that in those years "playing this type of music meant that you could go to jail or to the crazy house. In those days, you didn't have friends (*druzhki*), you had comrades-in-arms."[90] Moreover, the simple acquisition of blues or rock LPs or cassettes entailed risk. Nikolai Arutiunov remembered how he was detained by the police on the occasion of his first visit to Moscow's black market record exchange, and how their subsequent letter to the Institute where he studied led to unpleasantness. "At the Institute," he recalled, "they began to consider me an American spy, a subversive agent. This meant a lot of trouble for me."[91] Instruments were almost impossible to obtain in those years. Accordingly, Valerii Belinov and Boris Bulkin recounted fascinating tales about building their own guitars, while Mikhail Sokolov showed me the work bench in his bedroom where he learned to rebuild harmonicas and harmonica microphones. Access to venues for public performance was, of course, severely restricted, and those respondents who found places to play reported that prior censorship, unscheduled power outages, and roustings by the police were not uncommon.

There is little in blues that addresses itself directly to these kinds of repressive practices and their cultural residue. Overtly, blues does not concern itself with politics in the conventional sense. There are exceptions to this rule—songs like Leadbelly's "Bourgeois Blues" or John Brim's "Tough Times" come readily to mind—but they are very few and far between. As a music sung almost invariably in the first person singular, blues seems to lack that component essential to the production of political discourse: "we." Moreover, references to general conditions, all the more a critique of them, are quite sparse. But it would be a mistake to conclude on the basis of these observations that blues music lacks a politics. As Brian Ward has shown in his study of the role played by rhythm and blues in shaping African American consciousness during America's civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, popular music without an explicit political content can nonetheless express powerful messages that tap into broad-based expectations and aspirations, thus engendering a community

[87]Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow, 1981), 13.

[88]Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics* (Chicago, 1995). See also Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 42.

[89]Sonia Alvarez, Evelino Dagnino and Arturo Escaban, "Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements," in their *Culture of Politics, Politics of Culture* (Boulder, CO, 1998), 7.

[90]Interview with Aleksei Belov (22 August 2001).

[91]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).

aware of its common dispositions.[92] These considerations are not lost on Russian bluesmen, one of whom has remarked that "blues is the most apolitical music one can think of."

> The political moment is excluded, at least on the surface of things. Blues is individual. A bluesmen never says "we"; he sings about himself. But, on the other hand, it is the most political music imaginable inasmuch as blues always sings about freedom. Even if the song doesn't use the word "freedom," the implications, the context is always about achieving some liberation from conditions that surround the person. Therefore, in any society the bluesman is a kind of dissident. I think that in America in the sixties, people like The Band, Canned Heat, Paul Butterfield, or the Blues Project were not overtly politically oriented but at the same time were participants in a broad social movement that concerned itself with freedom. I think that much the same thing is true here today.[93]

Both content and context combine to confine this aspect of blues in today's Russia to the level of micropolitics. That is, the representation of the world from the perspective of the individual, in conjunction with a general understanding in the country that there is little point in pinning any hopes on extant political processes, mean that a politics of blues can be summed up in the stances that it provides for constructing a self oriented toward both autonomy and the struggle to achieve it. We can unpack this idea by applying with slight modification the categories developed by William Barlow that concern the political aspects of blues music in general to the particular case of Russia.[94]

The first of these is subversion. It refers exclusively to the nonverbal side of blues music. Here, the tonality of the music itself—especially in the dissonance effected by its texture and drive—disrupts the familiar, undercutting the sense of order associated with standard European melodic structures. Tony Russell has argued that blues music's subversion of conventional musical constraints has made it especially attractive to many white musicians for whom "to step out in the guise of the blues is to step out of line."[95] Adding to this effect, the music's overlay of rhythmic patterns on top of the basic beat engenders "the feeling ... of ... trying to break out of the constraining, divisive meter" that structures the song itself.[96] Vocal techniques can further enhance that effect. Whether stretching meaning beyond the words employed or communicating through nonverbal shrieks and moans, blues can index extramusical memories and aspirations. With variations in emphasis, Russian performers frequently commented during interviews on how one or another of these features of the music drew them to the blues.

The capacity of blues to engender community represents the second aspect of the music's politics. In this respect, we recall the proselytizing bent of many Russian bluesmen and their self-conscious struggle against *popsa*. The notion of community in a state of becoming

[92]Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998).

[93]Interview with Nikolai Arutiunov (25 July 1999).

[94]William Barlow, *"Looking Up at Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, 1989), 325–28.

[95]Tony Russell, "Blacks, Whites and Blues" in *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre*, Paul Oliver et al. (Cambridge, England, 2001), 232.

[96]John Shephard, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge, England, 1991), 131.

is thus immanent to the experience of performing this music. Moreover, like his counterpart anywhere, the Russian bluesman in singing about himself is simultaneously serving as a vicarious voice for unseen others who lack the means of self-expression. Whether these others actually appreciate this benefaction is an issue that is beside the point, here. Rather, our interest in blues as a medium for the creation of community concerns a particular artifice of blues aesthetics that creates the effect of experiencing performance as a kind of reality. This effect—that the performer is not merely performing, but directly conveying his feelings—stems from the music's simplicity and its direct emotive content which function to suppress the perception of artifice, itself, and to conjure the impression that one is listening to the unadorned truth. On that basis the bluesman is able to speak *to* and *for* others.[97] Muddy Waters once referred to this communitarian aspect of blues performance by noting that when a person "gets to realize that others have the same kind of trouble—or even worse—he understands that life isn't just pickin' on him alone."[98]

The third aspect of a politics of the blues involves something neither foregrounded in nor absent from our discussion thus far: freedom. It too is a micropolitics: not a social proclamation but an individual statement. In interviews, this personal sense of the term surfaced regularly.

> Interviewer: Do you think that in Russia it is possible to speak about a blues movement and a blues style?
>
> Vitalii Andreev: Well, if rock'n'roll is a music of protest, then blues is about freedom.
>
> Interviewer: Do you mean that it's the demand for freedom or the use of freedom?
>
> Andreev: No, it's the feeling of freedom. It's the feeling that you are free.[99]

Similarly, in the words of Kolia Gruzev, blues

> is some type of inner freedom. I think that when black people play blues, they feel the same way. Like Lightnin' Hopkins, who spent his life in small pubs and bars in Texas and didn't want to play to huge audiences. He was free to do this. He was a bluesman. Whether he was sitting on the street one day and playing and then playing in some club, it was all the same. He was the same. There was no conflict inside of him. He was congruent.[100]

The final aspect of a politics of the blues refers to resistance. It represents an integral feature of the blues community which defines itself against the hegemonic culture of the larger society. As is the case with freedom, resistance appears in subtle forms—palpable, but difficult to pinpoint or to circumscribe. An active politician, Sergei Mitrokhin, has remarked in this vein on the earthy manner that he associates with blues.

[97]Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York, 1995), 83–87.
[98]Quoted in Sandra Tooze, *Muddy Waters: The Mojo Man* (Toronto, 1997), 116.
[99]Interview with Vitalii Andreev (13 July 1999).
[100]Interview with Kolia Gruzev (15 July 1999).

> I like the idea of waking up with a terrible hangover, finding all my money and my woman gone, and thinking: "This isn't so bad." Blues is like that; experiencing terrible things but at the same time surviving them, and knowing that you are able to survive them. It makes you feel good about yourself.[101]

As Giia Dzagnidze intimated in the remarks quoted earlier, "blues is recalling what you have survived." Far from a form of fatalism, that recollection represents a validation of one's capacity to resist.

We conclude with the suggestion that blues music and culture can provide those elements that appear at a premium to persons undergoing the dislocations, disappointments, and challenges of a social order undergoing deep transformation. As was true for many African Americans in slavery's aftermath, a number of Russians have discovered in blues a mirror reflecting their lives, a window onto a new and unfamiliar world and a stance to assume within it. Separated by so many factors—time, space, language, race, culture, history, and circumstances—this in itself is remarkable. Yet the continuation of this music's history among those Russians who have adopted it—its adventures on Russian soil, so to speak—is equally remarkable for the insights that it provides into how the blues idiom has been adapted to Russian conditions, transformed into a object of "high" culture, and appropriated as a stance distinguishing its adherents from both the remnants of the unexpunged past and the dominant social practices associated with the still unfolding present.

[101]Conversation with Sergei Mitrokhin (6 January 1999).