

OPTION

MUSIC ALTERNATIVES

MAR/APR 1990
\$3.00

ANNIVERSARY
5th
ISSUE



Kate Bush



HR

GLENN BRANCA
COPERNICUS
QUEEN LATIFAH
ARTHUR BLYTHE
BLUE AEROPLANES
JUDY MOWATT
STEPHAN MICUS



COPERNICUS

On the Road With Copernicus: A Survival Guide to Eastern Europe

By David Conrad

Last summer, from June 13 to July 5, 1989, I went on a rock and roll tour through Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, as the bassist in Chill Faction, an experimental New York band, backing up Copernicus, a 50-year-old poet/performance artist who calls himself "a musical genius."

Copernicus is not the kind of performer the State Department sends over as cultural ambassador to the eastern bloc. He's a frightening sight, well over six feet tall, with shoulder-length white hair, and a face like a Polish gargoyle. He preaches a kind of metaphysical anarchist philosophy that makes Rastafarianism seem tame and rational. His main creed is that nothing exists. Onstage, dressed in Guatemalan peasant garb, papal robes, or polyester shirts that look like Liberace's shower curtains, he bellows, howls and primal-screams, chanting words or phrases over and over, rolling around on the floor or charging up and down the stage like a cross between a mad rhino and a participant in a Haitian Voodoo ceremony while the band improvises Sun Ra-style art/funk.

Underneath all this lurks a Polish-American landlord named Joe Smalkowski, who with his seemingly endless energy, along with the income from some real estate in Brooklyn, has launched three albums

and several years of highly publicized club and concert performances onto the "alternative" music scene. Back in March, when Copernicus told me we'd be going to Poland, I didn't believe it would really happen. The idea fascinated me much more than his anarchic free-for-all concerts and recording sessions in which I'd participated over the past few years, or Phoebe Snow's promotional tour, on which I was about to embark as a "hired gun"

sideman, but it sounded like a pipedream.

I'd been getting increasingly tired of playing for jaded New York audiences, or cloning the sound of one pop record or another for radio fans around the country, and this sounded like just what I needed. So when Joe called back to tell me we'd be going to Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and Russia as well, I still didn't believe it, but my adrenaline started rising. A night in CBGB's with Joe could be an adventure, so God only knew what he'd be like 5000 miles away from home, in front of audiences who might never have seen an American rock band before. Could glasnost stretch that far? I was curious, but I didn't really believe I'd find out.

By the middle of April, though, Joe had managed to get visas and official invitations from the governments of three communist countries, and I was getting at least one breathless telephone call a day from him, asking questions like "Do Russian concert halls have their own bass amplifiers?" and "Is it better to go from Vilnius to Moscow by train or car?," and the whole thing began to seem frighteningly real.

By May I was out with Phoebe, there was talk of her tour being extended into Japan next month, and my head was starting to spin. And then somewhere along the line, I realized that if I passed up this chance,



MICHAEL FORD

Party... Out standing in their field; Copernicus and band welcoming committee, no doubt).

I'd never forgive myself—Japan would be there forever, a regular stop on most rock tours, but Eastern Europe? Who knew? Everything was changing—by this time next year, we might not be able to get in. Let alone be allowed to play subversive experimental music for audiences who'd been systematically deprived of western culture. So I filled out the forms, got my 20 passport shots taken, and started reading maps, guidebooks and Dostoevsky. On June 13th, I touched down at Hamburg airport, and climbed into the Mercedes Benz cargo van that was to be home for the next 24 days, along with the other members of Chill Faction: Mike (guitarist), Ham (drummer), Lax (vocalist/guitarist/synthesizer player/Irishman), as well as Corbett (videocameraman/roadie), Michael F (sound engineer/driver), and Joe, the man who calls himself Copernicus.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The sun's gone down by the time we get through the Czech/German border. It's raining heavily, and the roads are terrible, so it's 3:00 AM when we finally reach Prague. The streets are swarming with people, many of them stumbling drunk, and we stagger exhausted into the Ambassador Hotel, dodging the little crowd of hustlers at the entrance that descend on us when they see our German license plates. Mike and I go up to our room, followed by two drunken hotel lobby cowboys who ask us if we want to fuck (the local Communist

We wake up late the next day, go to the sports arena for a short soundcheck, back to the hotel long enough to change, and then it's showtime. 7000 people in a concrete hockey rink, stage hung with tie-dye flags, another 1000 people milling around outside, accosting us as we go in like we're Rock Stars. Pulnoc ("Midnight") are just going onstage—the remnants of the legendary Plastic People, a band dating back to the 1960s, some of whom have been jailed for the crime of playing rock music. It's sort of a cameo appearance for them—their guitarist defected in New York last month, and their lead singer's in the hospital giving birth to twins, but they're given a thunderous heroes' welcome. The place is huge, wild and echoing, lots of video screens and smoke machines. Pulnoc play a short set, four droning, psychedelic numbers, and they're done.

Then we come on, propelled by the adrenaline of a big crowd, 7000 people who haven't had a rock show in their city for five years (not counting Duran Duran—"bullshit" says a Czech, they want their own music). The room's stifling hot and smoke-filled, I'm soaked through my suit in minutes, and I take my jacket off and play bare from the waist, feeling like a hard-core musician. They pelt us with

coins; at one point Joe has the whole crowd chanting "Elvis!" with him. He does a piece about "Black and White," and Corbett, our video cameraman/roadie, brings down the house, appearing onstage, and solemnly raising his shirt to show the Czechs the color of his skin. We get an encore, and go into a spontaneous groove. Joe chants "They Own Everything," and it's done, the crowd screaming and stamping.

Afterwards, we take a walk in the crowd waiting outside the arena. It could be 1968 here, with the obvious absence of pot. People are generally quieter, more sober, but they flash peace signs, thumbs-up, etc., and talk intensely with us with their few words of English, their desire to make contact, and ours to understand, breaking through the language barrier.

Back inside, I watch Garaz, another raw Prague band. Gabriela the MC, in her impossibly tiny hot pants, tells me about the difficulties the bands face, forbidden to receive payment for performing, trying to maintain themselves as musicians while holding down their state-assigned jobs—it used to be worse, she tells me, they used to get arrested just for playing to an audience. Musicians and artists I talk to are quick to

let me know that they're "amateurs," not granted official status by the state. (The woman selling pressed flowers in frames near the castle, when I asked her if she'd made them herself, said, "Yes, but it's only a hobby..." nervously, as if I might report her to the authorities for posing as a "real" artist.) I wonder how we seem to these people, coming from a country where anyone with the inclination and money to publicize themselves can be an "artist," regardless of ability or commitment.

The next day we wander around the dazzling architecture of Prague all morning, and then to the Junior Klub to set up for the soundcheck. A young kid we met last night outside the gig is there waiting for us with his younger sister and a group of friends. Shy, but getting bolder as he sees that we accept him, the kid reveals that he's a musician. He wants to know all about the gear. His sister, about 12, and her friends are clustered around Corbett, who's teaching them how to operate his video camera. The boy tries Mike's guitar, entranced by the delay and the whangbar, then my bass—he's in heaven. His little sister follows me outside, saying, "I wanted to give you something, but I have nothing..." My heart's about to break, and then she finishes the job, reaching in her pocket—"Oh, but I have this!"—and handing me a brightly colored plastic marble.

Blecch plays first, a German experimental band, with a weird, unpredictable bald singer who plays trumpet, guitar, and a tiny Casio synthesizer, a wailing violinist and a superb rhythm section. The ensemble work is beautiful—these guys really *play* together. I ask the singer what the words mean, and he looks doubtful, and says, "Dada..." The drummer, a dead ringer for Frederic Chopin, compares New York to Munich, their hometown. "In New York you can make more money, but in Munich I have my studio, and I have my head," he says, tapping it. They play a long, fiery set; I could have listened to more.

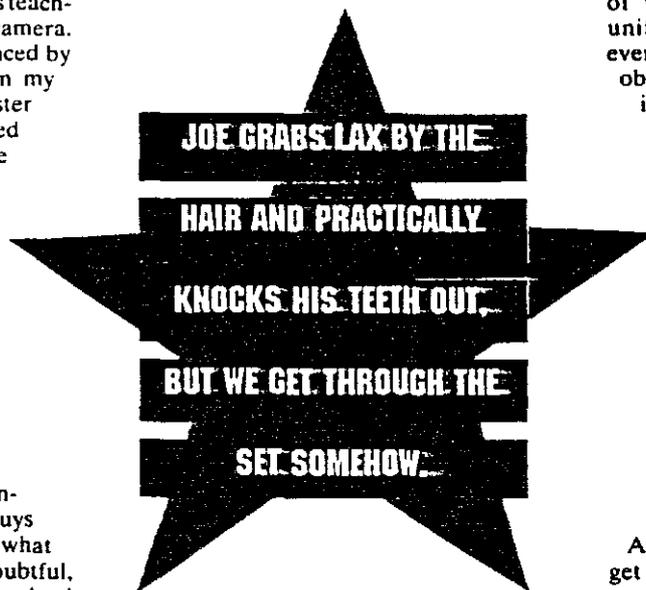
Meanwhile, Joe paces up and down in the dressing room, getting angrier and angrier. He hates music that doesn't serve his needs, and the longer Blecch play, the less he likes it. When it's finally time for us to start, he charges onstage like a mad rhino and knocks over everything in sight, immediately tangling his mike cord up with two stands, so that he has to do the rest of the piece dragging a mass of metal tubing around the stage on a short cable, like a ball and chain, while he rants against "the Authorities"—ironic justice at its best.

POLAND

We cross the Polish border, and drive

past endless pastures, gardens, and golden wheat fields with great swaths carved out of them. It's all one huge timeless farm. Seeing this, it's hard to understand how the cities are suffering food shortages. Children selling strawberries and blueberries stand holding their glass jars at arm's length into the road, like little statues.

On the outskirts of Gdynia, the villages start to crowd together and the architecture gets more modern, stark and drab, until we hit real city, mile after mile of huge gray housing projects, washing hung out everywhere, railroad sidings with great mountains of coal and plumes of black smoke rising up all around us into a greasy cloud hanging over the whole picture, making the late afternoon look like dusk. It's like a picture of Beirut, or what I imagine it was like here during the war.



Off the highway, the war zone ambience continues for a few miles and then abruptly changes to parks, ornate little 19th century cottages, church steeples, and a strange old lighthouse overlooking the Baltic and we're in Sopot, the Polish Riviera. We find the hotel, a dodgy-looking joint over a restaurant next to the railroad station—small rooms with bare lightbulbs, tiny beds, and holes in the wall. The bathtub drains directly onto the floor, and the water's ankle deep, running out into the hall, but no one seems to care. Trains roar by every few minutes, shaking the foundations.

Down at the bar, we meet the regulars: George, the bartender with whom elaborate currency-changing deals are soon in progress; Jerry Lee Lewis, whispering through the artificial voice-box on his

throat; and his small bald friend, even drunker than he is, who desperately wants to communicate something, but we can't make out what. Lax tells me that they've already carried two customers out—the Poles are living up to their reputation as Olympic drinkers. Suddenly, Jerry Lee lets out a rebel yell, which comes out of the little speaker on his throat sounding like a wave hitting the beach, pulls a gun out of his jacket, and points it arm's length at us. The moment of shock passes as we see it's a broken water pistol, but Jerry's tickled to death by the reaction he's gotten, and he and his little friend both babble at us in tongues I suspect even a Pole might not be able to understand.

Darek, the towering concert organizer/interpreter, appears with his girlfriend, who looks like a backwoods Nastassia Kinski. We head over to the Grand Hotel on the beach for a four-course dinner with bottles of wine, served by classic old-world uniformed waiters whose disdain for everything about us except our currency is obvious. The check for six people, including service charge, comes to 50,000 zlotys, the equivalent of ten U.S. dollars. Welcome to the wonderful world of zlotys. In my pocket right now is a coin worth 1/100th of a cent. There's an ongoing story behind this economy, too long to get into here, but it feels strange to be suddenly wealthy in a country where a highly trained technician might make sixteen U.S. dollars a week.

I walk down to the beach, where I'm approached by Alexandra, a teenage student, out with her girl gang in search of beer. After determining that I have none, they get into trying out their school English on me, and it comes out that I'm playing in the music festival—big excitement! See you there, I tell them, and head down the beach and back to the hotel, wash up, and then go over to the Opera Lesna amphitheatre, where the festival is already in progress.

The Blue Aeroplanes are on when we arrive. English teen-pop, obviously very popular here—kids are dancing on the lip of the stage, some appear to be trained dancers, and a lot of the audience is gyrating in the aisles. Almost immediately, Alexandra appears with two of her friends. She's overjoyed to see me because I, with my backstage pass, can get her in to see Poems For Liala, her favorite band. She clamps onto my arm like a vise, negotiating in lightning Polish with the security kid, presumably informing him that she's my wife, and then makes a beeline for P.F.L.'s dressing room as soon as she's in. A sloppy local heavy metal band is on next, and I get bored and wander around the amphitheatre, and before I know it,

Alexandra appears again, clamps on like a vise, and tells me in her charming accent that she's heard American musicians use a lot of drugs. I say yes, some do, and she asks whether I've got any. No, I don't, I say, and she's visibly disappointed, but doesn't relax her grip.

One of the lads ran into Corbett, and reports that he's roaring drunk, charging around raving about Nazis. I sense some craziness coming up. Corbett and Joe haven't been getting along well, to say the least.

The sloppy boys finish up, and we go on. Mike F's trying to keep the sound system functioning with duct tape. Corbett appears, and yes, he's smashed—covered with sweat, he runs up to me shouting, "I got Nazis on my ass!" and then runs off after something. The stage sound is impossible—Ham might as well be back in Queens for all I can hear of him. Joe strides on with a ten-foot tree branch he's found somewhere, knocks a cymbal to kingdom come with it, and then flings it at Corbett, who's lurching around with his camera at the foot of the stage. Corbett screams something and runs off, and we don't see him again for the rest of the show. The audience is undecided about us—we seem to be going over with the drunker elements, but it's hard to tell, they're so far away. At one point it seems like about 200 people are streaming for the exit. I wonder if it's us, or if there's a riot going on. Joe grabs Lax by the hair and practically knocks out his teeth, but we get through the set somehow.

Corbett reappears afterward, out of his head. It seems he was threatened by some skinheads who grabbed his Batman cap and looked like they were ready to kick his ass, but some other Polish guys intervened and drove them off. Between his conflicts with Joe and the effect on his nerves of being stared at endlessly, as the only black person many of these people have ever seen, Corbett's reached the end of his rope.

In the dressing room, Joe starts talking as if we're in a war zone—"Don't anyone wander off! Stay close together and

we'll get out of here quickly." Lax and I decide to find Corbett and walk him back to the hotel, but he's nowhere to be found, so we get in the van and head back with Joe, who's raving nonstop about what he's going to do to Corbett. We succeed in getting him to postpone the execution until tomorrow, the lads go out looking for a party someone heard about. I end up drinking beer in the hotel corridor with Michael F, and getting to sleep about 3 AM, the sky already getting light, and the music from the festival still audible in the distance.

Copernicus!" I'm nervous for a moment, but then one runs over grinning and hands me a hot roll, and I relax. I'm glad I'm not Corbett, though.

LITHUANIA, USSR

Driving into Kaunas, I start to notice the poverty of the USSR—it looks different from poverty in America, maybe because there isn't the wealth alongside to contrast it with, but seeing the way people live, it doesn't surprise me that Gorbachev is less popular here than in the west.

By the time we finish the soundcheck at the park amphitheatre, there's no time to go the hotel, no dressing room, no running water, we've been in the van for eleven hours and it's 90 degrees, and humid. Joe's gone to the hotel to rest and is nowhere to be found. Audra, the MC, is getting very nervous—the crowd wants to hear *us now*, so we go onstage and start playing "Hostage," in the middle of which Joe appears in full polyester regalia, with a lethal look about him. We segue directly into "Authorities," and Joe drips rage, but enough cameras are pointed at him to keep him happy, and the show goes well. It's over quickly. I don't think I've ever felt as sweaty and filthy on stage before.

After bathing (at last), we get back in the van with our guides and go to Audra's place for a party. Her apartment is large, done up in fake wood paneling, meticulously clean and well-kept. A banner hangs in the living room with the words of the Lithuanian national anthem embroidered on it. About eight people are there, including Vidas, a jazz guitarist, two video artists whose work we'll see later; Eléna, our interpreter, who'll be going with us to Moscow; Audra and her motherly neighbor, who's prepared a feast for us. We eat and drink, toasts are made, a ghetto blaster plays medleys of imitation American disco hits, and we compare notes on our different worlds.

A young bass player with a heavy metal haircut, wearing a T-shirt that reads



LARRY KIRWEN

Copernicus and Denis Davidov (Hero)

The next morning Corbett informs us that he's bailing out. He'll get a ride back to Berlin with the Blue Aeroplanes, and fly home from there. He seems relieved, but his dream of videotaping himself in Red Square will have to wait.

Walking back from the pier, I see a gang of skinheads in an underpass. They see me, and shout, "Hey! You!

"MONSTERS OF FUCK," asks me which great jazz bassists I listen to, and where he can find a teacher in the U.S.—he plans to go to Salt Lake City. Vidas describes growing up in Siberia, where his parents were exiled by Stalin. Elena talks about the Soviet rewriting of Lithuanian history books, and how a friend at school was arrested by the KGB for possession of a pre-war history text. These people are intense nationalists. Lithuania, with a completely distinct culture and language, has only had a few years of independence since the 15th century, and they want it back. Audra gives each of us a nationalist pin, and we promise to wear them on stage in Moscow.

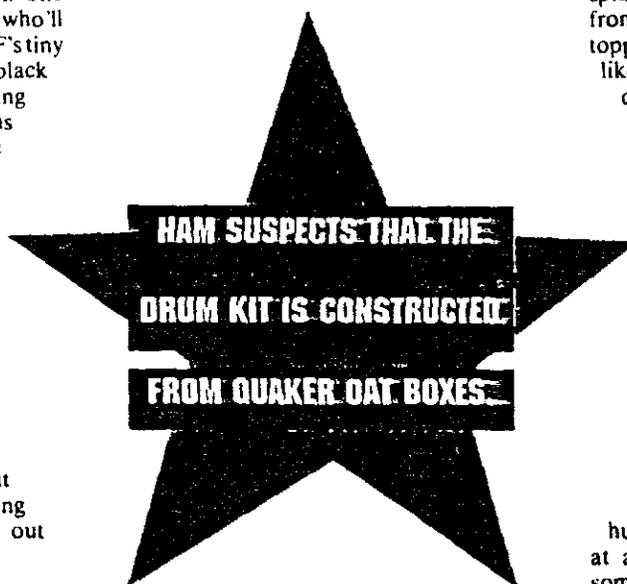
The next day we ask our friends about black market currency exchange, and Elena says no, it can't be done (I later find out she has an extreme aversion to anything black market, and also come to understand why), but Audra says yes, she'll arrange it. She looks up a friend on the hotel staff who'll do the deal, and we go into Michael F's tiny room and enact a perfect little black market ritual—Audra's friend looking around all shifty-eyed and nervous as he counts our dollars and hands the package of rubles to Audra, who counts them on the bed. She motions nervously to someone to turn the radio on, and shrill, sleazy eastern dance music, perfect for the occasion, fills the room as the rest of us look around for hidden microphones. Then we go to a music store and look at outlandish Russian electric guitars, accordions, and synthesizers with Cyrillic writing on them. Mike and I buy Ukrainian cornets for the equivalent of \$4.50, and leave the store laughing hysterically—the girls can't figure out why.

Several admirers are there to see us off at the station for our 14-hour train ride to Moscow. The goodbyes take a while, and there's a crisis concerning who's going to carry Joe's eight huge suitcases now that Corbett's gone, but we make it onto the train at the last second, sweaty and exhausted, with Joe in a murderous, hung-over rage.

The compartment is 8'x10' and stifling, so we try to open the window, but it's jammed tight. The prospect of spending 14 hours in this oven is no joke, and we try everything, prying it open with a coal shovel, three of us leaning on it with all our weight, scraping away the rotting molding with a knife. But it won't budge, until finally Mike and I dismantle the whole frame and pull the outer pane down with all our might. We get a round of applause, and then some spring mechanism inside the frame snaps it shut, and we have to go through the whole process all over again, propping it open

with soda bottles this time, and then at last we can breathe. We leave the dismantled window frame out in the corridor, where the other passengers study it quizzically as they pass, as if they can't figure out what it is.

The train is rough and loud, like a New York subway. The bunks are ancient and small, and the bedding's sandpappy and smells of mildew. A huge fat Russian officer in the next compartment is getting drunker and louder by the minute, and we can hear Joe on the other side, nursing his hangover and plotting agonizing punishments for us all. As the train leaves the station, announcements and piped-in Marx Brothers soundtrack music crackle through a loudspeaker on the compartment wall. We practically fall out of the bunks every time the train lurches. When we pass another train, which happens every 20



minutes or so, it sounds like a nuclear explosion, and we all lie there for about an hour, laughing hysterically, like kids on a camping trip. My feet are hanging out the window freezing, and the rest of me is sweating under the thick wool blanket. The fat officer's snores are audible even over the racket of the train, but I actually manage to sleep for an hour or two before the Marx Brothers music screeches through the speaker, and we've arrived in Moscow.

MOSCOW

We pile off the train, and find a porter who manages to stack all our luggage onto one dolly, but now we're stuck, because we don't know where we're going—Slava, the concert promoter, is nowhere to be seen, and he's the only one who knows which hotel we're staying in.

It's intensely hot and humid, and we wait for two hours, Joe cursing Slava, and ordering Elena to translate all kinds of verbal abuse at him when he arrives. We converse with the porters, all of whom, it seems, have been to America, or know someone there—they love to recite the names of American cities, pronouncing them like magic words. Finally Slava shows up, apparently there was some difficulty getting transportation for us. Joe snarls at him, but without much energy, and we pile into a dilapidated tourist bus, drive a short distance, and pull up in front of a huge, ominous building that looks like a set from *Blade Runner*, looming over the Moscow river.

The Ukraina Hotel was built by Stalin as a monument to himself, one of six almost identical buildings around Moscow. 19 stories high, it's shaped like a crouching sphinx, two blocks long with a tall spire in front and two smaller ones on each side, topped with huge stone stars. The lobby is like a giant cave—you could put a medium-sized apartment building inside it. Video machines line one wall, a souvenir shop on the other side sells the ubiquitous gold-and-red enamel Communist Party pins and busts of Lenin (17 rubles without his hat, 20 with), and the ceiling is painted like the Sistine chapel.

We're told that it will be another two hours before we can check in, so we go to the restaurant, starving after our journey. Here, the Soviet restaurant ritual begins, a Kafkaesque experience that involves being told there are no tables when the huge room's almost empty, being seated at a table that's already laid out with someone's dinner, waiting for an hour, ordering from a huge menu on which only two dishes are available (you guess which two—the waiter won't tell you), being served things you didn't order, refused things people around you are being served, and generally having your sanity tested. Elena and Slava have long, heated arguments with the waiters. When we ask them what it's about, they just roll their eyes and shake their heads in exasperation.

This process will be repeated each time we eat here, getting longer and more insane each time. It appears to be a way of getting tips, but the tipping procedure is obscure, since it's illegal, and Elena, who has no patience with black market money maneuverings, will have none of it. Elena and the Russians are extremely proud—we're not allowed to so much as buy them a drink, though we've obviously got much more money than they do. This gets difficult in situations with taxi drivers and waiters—our friends will argue with them for half an

hour rather than be charged the inflated prices which we, tycoons that we are, would pay without even noticing (the difference between \$5 and \$7 for a four-course meal).

I shower and go out for a walk, feeling like I'm dreaming. It's hot, bright, and humid. I pass monolithic buildings with hammer-and-sickles and pictures of Lenin and other Communist saints built into the architecture, and long lines of people waiting to buy fruit, vegetables, ice cream, and sweet brown grape juice, the only cold drink they seem to have here.

Forbidding-looking guards stand at the Kremlin's tower gate, but tourists are going in and out, so I walk up the ramp and stroll around inside taking pictures, until I start across a paved strip toward some yellow buildings and hear whistles blowing from three directions, and I look up and see two guards waving me back, and one rushing toward me, so I retreat back to the curb. Ominous black limousines fly in and out of the gates at 60 MPH, three at a time—the sense of tremendous power is perfectly maintained here. Next to the Catholic Church, this is the most effective theater of power I've ever seen—decades of crushing domination, embodied in the architecture, the robot-like faces of the guards, and the limos, like great black sharks swimming in and out of the huge fortress gates.

More careful now of where I walk, I find my way to Red Square. Crowds of tourists are everywhere: there are photographers who'll take your picture for a few rubles, write down your address, and then send you the prints later (try that in America); and the ever-present seedy young currency hustlers (Excuse me, do you speak English? Where are you from? Do you want to make money-change?). I watch the goose-stepping changing of the guard in front of Lenin's tomb, and then I find a taxi and I'm back at the hotel in seconds (Moscow taxi drivers are Kamikazes, just like their New York counterparts, except they're equipped with standard shifts, enabling them to accelerate like Chuck Yeager while simultaneously

making black market currency deals with their trembling passengers).

Slava and his entourage are waiting at the hotel, and we all head for the Arbat, Moscow's Art Strip, to a restaurant someone knows, and can pull strings at to get us a table—"traditional Russian meal," they tell us, which turns out to be mostly alcohol. The Russians make endless toasts and keep filling everyone's glass, whether or not they want it. Slava's young friend Matvi decides that I'm not drinking enough, so he empties my glass of wine into an ashtray, and replaces it with vodka. The food consists of glutinous meat dumplings in a thick mushroom sauce—it looks scary, but tastes pretty good, and I eat two portions, dodging vodka and cognac refills all the while. The ear-splitting house band plays in the next room, a jumping middle



At the Moscow train station: Mike, Mike F, Ham, David

eastern-style combo featuring a percussionist whose job consists of turning on a drum machine and playing fills on the buttons every four bars and a synthesizer player who makes sounds like geese being tortured. The room's hermetically sealed, and I'm the only non-smoker.

After dinner, we walk the length of the Arbat, stopping to hear street buskers and check out the sidewalk artists. The moneychangers are everywhere, following us for blocks sometimes after we've said "nyet" over and over. They'll sell us anything we want, or barter, or buy anything we have or are wearing—sunglasses, belts, etc. Mike is accosted by a woman who jumps out of her car and chases him down the street wanting to buy his day-glo orange running shorts.

I wake up late the next day and go down to breakfast, where Elena tells me that the concert we were to do in a stadium outside of town has been canceled by order of the KGB, or "Kagaba" as the Russians call it. I'm kind of disappointed, but Joe will be glad for the break—he's exhausted and has just about lost his voice. Slava is taking us on a sightseeing tour today.

After breakfast we get into the same ramshackle bus that brought us from the station, which already contains members of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. They're catching a ride to the Armand Hammer center, a huge gray block containing a replica of a Dallas shopping mall, which is to be the first stop on our tour. The NGDBs are jaded veterans of all this, having played here regularly since 1975. They tell us they've been hanging out with their friends at the U.S. embassy, where you can drink cold beer and eat cheeseburgers.

It's Monday, and almost all the museums in Moscow are closed, so the tour is almost entirely churches (Slava's a member of the Orthodox Church—a "believer," as he says, and I think this is the aspect of Moscow that interests him most). The churches are beautiful, but after about two hours, I feel that I'll go berserk if I see one more onion dome or

icon, and the lads are getting cranky from hunger, so we persuade the Russians to stop at the Cosmos Hotel, where they assure us we can get a meal, though the general rule here is that when it's time to eat, it's time for the restaurants to be closed.

We troop into the vast near-empty restaurant, and the standard argument/negotiation follows. Elena gets more and more pissed off, until finally she points at a table, telling us to sit down, and then she says something to the Russians, and they disappear from the room. The whole scene has a bad smell about it, and I start making leaving motions, thinking I'll take off and eat elsewhere, but the lads are starving, so they go with the program. Joe's trying to get me and Elena to sit down, hectoring away about how we must stop going off on our own, "give up our individuality and

stay with the group"—a hell of a principle to be upholding in this particular place, but we escape, and walk out across Red Square.

Elena explains that the waiter didn't want to serve us, but finally agreed to serve the Americans only; she would be allowed to stay as interpreter, but our Russian friends would have to go. The logic behind this evades me, but I'm starting to get the feel of how things work here, and I don't like it.

Elena tries to explain to me how it is. The circumstances of her life and her country are enraging to her, and I realize how hard it is for me to conceive of what it would feel like to grow up under this system. She tells me that *1984* has just been published here, and about the mechanisms used by the system to prevent people from traveling. I feel an almost physical claustrophobia, and I don't know how to reply—every time I have a reaction, a voice inside me says, "Easy for you to say..."

Coming here, I had a simplistic picture of Russia today—glasnost was working, perestroika maybe not so well, but I imagined that Gorbachev, Lifter of the Curtain of Silence, would be a popular figure. After listening to people talk, I realized what should have been obvious: they're not grateful to Gorbachev, because he's given them nothing. They're still living in poverty, and the system still pins them to the ground: it's just standing on them a little lighter. These people know damn well that the right to talk to each other, read Orwell, or fly their national flag, are basic rights they're born with, not gifts handed down from above. They know they have the right to travel freely, choose their own leaders, and teach their children real history, but those rights, and many others, are still being kept from them.

We arrive at the Cinema Rusche theatre the next day, only to discover that the rented snare drum is broken, there are no microphones, the music store is closed for another hour, and the matrons that run the theater want us out fast so they can get ready for the movie matinee. We wait about 45 minutes, and then it's obvious that we won't have time to do anything before the movie audience comes in, so we're told to come back later.

We go to dinner and come back to do a ragged soundcheck. Unidentified people are running all over the stage, no one can figure out how the amplifiers plug in, and Ham suspects that the drum kit is

constructed from Quaker Oat boxes. Michael F wires the tragic sound system together with duct tape, maintaining his zen-like sense of humor through it all. The audience is let in well before we've finished, and they applaud wildly, assuming this is the show they've paid to see. We step in the back for five minutes, and then the lights go down, and we're on.

The room's full, about 3000 people. A contingent who've traveled all the way from Prague stand in the front, holding up a big "Welcome Copernicus" banner, and going crazy. A smoke machine spews greasy fumes, in spite of endless instructions to the Russians that we don't want it. About halfway into the set, everything shuts off—lights, sound, amps. We stand in pitch darkness for a minute, and then the



The author in red square

emergency lights go on. The audience is shouting and whistling. I take the opportunity to blow some neo-post-modern cornet improvisations, and Ham joins in on the drums. Joe lectures to the few people in the front row who can hear him, while a mob of technicians try to fix the power amps, which have apparently blown. Then the power returns, and we launch back in, but we've lost momentum. We end up with "Blood," and walk off waving, but the audience doesn't seem to realize the show's over.

The backstage area's like a vision of hell—airless, dark, and filled with smoke from cigarettes and smoke machines. Kids hold out torn dollar bills for us to autograph, one guy's got an album by some Russian band, but he wants *our* signatures on it. A Czech girl wants one of my strings as a

memento. She points at her breasts and says something in Czech that sounds like an invitation, and I sign her poster and go looking for a breath of oxygen, without success. Caravan, a Russian lounge-metal band that seems to have listened to Pat Benatar a lot, takes the stage with smoke machines blasting away. Eventually we pack our entourage into the van, and go back to the hotel.

We end up in Lax's room drinking toasts, singing, and getting generally sentimental. Slava's associates keep trying to have business meetings with me and Michael F. Cinya gives us a concert of arias from the echoing bathroom, and we all take turns blowing my cornet out the window into the echoing courtyard until Russians start shouting threats. Out in the hall, Elena and I talk about an artist exchange program between the U.S. and Lithuania, an idea that excites me, with that country's emerging nation status. We realize how much we've become friends in the midst of all the madness, and promise to correspond, and I give her my Elvis Costello tape (highly unavailable here), thinking she and her friends might relate to the angry-voiced Irishman.

Back in the room, the party's reached a fever pitch, and bangings are starting to come from the walls and ceiling. We all embrace each other like it's New Year's Eve, finish off the last few drops, and go back to our rooms for an hour or two of sleep.

Long goodbyes on the Ukraine steps the next morning, then a lot of tears at the airport—even Elena, always contained and impassive, breaks down finally. I feel that she's crying as much for herself having to stay here as for us leaving, and tears come to me too. The obvious invitations to visit New York aren't so easy here, knowing what's involved for these people to travel. My desire to maintain contact, to find some way to help them out, is almost physical—I have to keep that feeling, and work to do something useful with it, not just bring it home with me like a souvenir.

We pass easily through customs and wait at the gate, listening to Americans announce their final assessments of Russia, and their intention to kiss the ground at Kennedy airport, and eventually we board the plane. Several hours later, we fly over the uninhabited coast of Greenland, and I wonder what it would feel like to live down there, in that beautiful prehistoric landscape, a world without human beings.