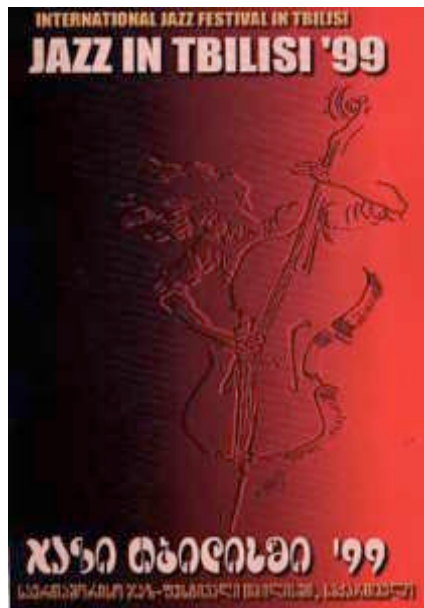


Tour Tbilisi Georgia November 1999

Written by Tony Overwater



After all these years of travelling by car and train for many hours a day I thought I would be really happy that our careers are in an upwards motion and that flying has become a standard form of transportation. But when you are 10.000 meters up in the sky and go through a rafting-like experience in a jetstream or spend many hours at airports due to delays also this dream-come-true starts wearing off. I suppose it will always be unnatural for human beings to fly. Sometimes my body has arrived but my spirit is still on his way and if you leave again the next day it stays wandering around for days like lost luggage.

If you travel like us and want to experience each destination as much as possible it wears you out pretty soon. But when I experience other jazz musicians who prefer to stay in their four star standard hotel and only see the airports and concert halls of the various countries they visit I am convinced that it's worth the headaches, sleepless nights and uncontrolled emotions.



This trip will take us to Tbilisi, Georgia. A country which is not so much in the news lately but is surrounded by countries that are going through some major crises. Like Armenia where only two days ago a group of

rebels entered the parliament buildings and killed 8 people including the prime minister.

This will be our first experience in a country that used to belong to the USSR. a country right between the Black and the Caspic sea and bearing from one sea to the other the Caucasian mountains. A culture right between, on the north side, Russia and, on the south side, the Middle East. It has a language that is not related to neither Arabic nor Russian. Georgia is well known for it's highly developed cultural life and it's excellent cuisine and wines.

This will be also the first time that I'm travelling without my bass. Unfortunately the air plane between Vienna and Tbilisi was not big enough to carry my instrument. I left my house this morning feeling odd to leave my big red bass case at home. I'm curious what they will offer me. In this trio the bass is quite prominent and it demands a lot of my technical skills and of the quality of the bass.

After we crossed the Black Sea, we flew over light brown treeless hills before we saw the wide spread out city of Tbilisi. As we landed and taxied to the airport mirror-glassed Mercedeses drove up the runway and two army helicopters circled around and landed just beside us as we departed the plane. Some shouting of nervous looking officials and the American soldiers who had just landed with their choppers. We had no ideas what that was about but nobody seemed shocked and the bus that had waited for our arrival took us on a very bumpy ride to the airport buildings. Welcome to Georgia.



As we waited for the jazz festival organiser to show up we were surrounded by a dozen taxi drivers trying to get us to use their cabs. We just waited, trying to look as much as possible as a jazz trio so the organiser would be able to spot us. He did and he drove us to our hotel telling us the ins and outs of the jazz festival.

It was the first jazz festival in 10 years. The last one was still organised by the Communist party. Despite of the poverty in Georgia they had money enough to invite the complete Sun ra arkestra, Freddy Hubbard, Art Blakey and many more American guests.

This is festival is maybe a little less glamourous but it does feature also some fine Georgian musicians. There are different bands from Finland, France, Morocco,

Germany and ofcourse from Holland. All of them well supported by their governments for financial support.

The festival takes place in an old theatre, old communistic style, overly ornamented like a Dutch Barrel organ, with three balconies which reminds us most of the theatre from the Muppetshow. It's cold. The audience is wearing fur coats and hats. Even during the concerts, with the theatre completely filled with people, it was still uncomfortably cold. A cold draft moved the curtains behind the stage which made me wonder if the roof was still in tact. The feeling of the audience though was quite the opposite. I don't think I ever saw such a warm and receptive audience. They clapped for the solo's, during the solo's , after the themes and during the announcements. If the French piano player, that played the second set, said he liked Mozart he received a warm applause, when he said he would play something from Mozart's Requiem he even got a more enthusiastic response. Motivated by this responsive audience he took out his whole bag of tricks and played all the hits he knew driving the audience to extacy. We tried to estimate the response to our set. Maybe a similar response or maybe, after our announcement 'And now something from the Icelandic singer Bjork' it would stay very quiet and after a few seconds someone would shout 'Go home!'



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Saturday morning. Despite the fact that I'm very tired and we have a 3 hour time difference here I put my alarm clock at 9 o'clock. I don't want to waste my time. We are here only for three days and we want to experience as much as we can. We have breakfast in our luxurious Sheraton Hotel, grab our coats and camera and ask for a map of the city. Just like in China and Syria this Sheraton Hotel looks like a well protected island in the middle of a dangerous environment. As we leave the property of the hotel we are in a completely other world. No shiny fountains, first class background piano player and golden chandeliers but streets where walking on is a challenge let stand driving a car. Every corner is a garbage disposal. People live in houses which are hardly recognisable as such. We walk to a building that looks like a church on our map.

A man in front of the building tells us it's not a church. It's a building, built in 1985, that looks like a church but was made to do wedding ceremonies in. I guess the communist leaders wanted to replace a Christian ceremony by a more neutral one. Since that day it has not been maintained and with its broken stairs and windows it looks like a ruin but it is still in use. The man invites us to stay because in half an hour there will be another ceremony. We decide to continue and tears come to our eyes as we wander through the small streets. It is obvious that this country was once a rich, cultural and beautiful country and with its 5000 years of history it's still impressive but the people here have start all over again. Was it the many years of communism or the mafia or is it some other reason that this country is living so much below its level.



Suddenly the gold shiny windows of our hotel dissonate with the ruins of the city. We're back in our hotel. I

feel embarrassed to be staying here. We decide not to go to the swimming pool and the health club as we planned. I go up to my room and sit in front of my window overlooking the city and reflect on our painful impressions of our walk.



When I read this last paragraph to Yuri he said we sounded like some inexperienced white boys who had never seen poverty before. Maybe so, but this seems to touch me more than our travels through Africa, China and the Middle east. Maybe I didn't expect it here.



Back to the music.



After we had lunch at the restaurant Stuttgart (they sponsored the festival by providing meals for the musicians) we went to the theatre to do a soundcheck. We arrived at 5 and to my surprise there was no bass. As I understood it their where supposed to be 2 basses so I could choose. I tried one bass the night before but I wasn't happy about it and I asked for another one. Than I was told the bass I was supposed to play on would arrive with the next group at 6 o'clock. Officially we had soundcheck until six. Now I was worried and nervous. The other bass I played on yesterday would not come back for some reason with the change that this new bass would be even worse.... It was. Besides the fact that it had no sound and a much to low action it had a very short restpin. I put some bricks on stage to put the bass on so that at least it was at the proper height. After a soundcheck of ten minutes we

had to stop because the other group had to check their sound and than start playing their part of the concert. So I had no time to study on the bass. With our repertoire full of chords, double stops, bowed parts and solo's (including my solo feature on 'Killing me softly') this was quite a challenge. We sort of managed. The audience who never had heard that kind of music (afterwards we heard we were sort of an experiment for the festival) was very receptive and we signed at least 50 autographs and shook the same amount of hands. People were thrilled and we stayed on stage for an hour feeling very warm and pleased. All the frustrations of the concert and the bass had disappeared.

The next day we went shopping. It has become quite a tradition for us. We can spend hours buying necklaces, jewelry, camera's and clothes. Commenting each others shopping without remorse. Joost is mostly accused by us of buying pebbles which he himself calls either jewels or minerals. But this time our mission was photo camera's. Especially odd Russian camera's. I wanted to buy a small odd camera which would have a different character as the ones we know from Japan. Misha, the president of the festival, was amazed that we would be interested in this old Russian stuff but he found us the perfect flea market where we found what we were looking and much more.

We bought camera's and watches and some other stuff. It feels a bit strange to spend money in this country where



everybody has so little but at least on a micro scale we helped some people here, where the average income is 10\$ per month.



Now I'm sitting for the sixth time in three days in Restaurant Stuttgart where the Georgian wine and champagne are drunk at the same time and in quite impressive amounts, especially for me as a non drinker. But than again, I like to adapt to the habits of the country.



Our promised visit to a neighbouring city is reduced to a visit to it's cathedral. This is worth the fly ticket price by it self, though. We arrive just before sunset after a short but beautiful ride through the hills that surround Tbilisi. The way from the parking to the cathedral is filled with merchants, all suddenly in action, surprised by such late visitors. We buy candles, silver rings and hats. It's Sunday, this whole scene reminds me of stories in the bible and in Jesus Christ Superstar where merchants also surround the temples. Once we enter the square of the church surrounded by a huge wall the atmosphere is peaceful and sacred again. As the last rays of sun light up the top of the church we enter the church. The light inside of the church is so dimmed that it takes quite a while before we can see the interior of the church. The atmosphere is breathtaking and our extravagant mood we

had outside the church walls, dealing and joking with the merchants, has changed at once. Each of us go our own way and we light the candles we just bought for the various saints, Christs and mother Mary's. Some parts of the church are so dark that paintings only become visible once you lit your candle and put it on the altar. Maka, a friendly young girl that always travels with us here as a translator, explains me the functions and values of the different saints and places in the church. This is a Georgian church. It's much more humble and earthy as the catholic churches I know, but at the same time it's much more appealing and warm than the protestant churches. A soft voice starts singing somewhere. The sound is so diffused and serene by the acoustic of the church that it takes me a while to locate it. A priest with a long dark beard in a long black robe is softly singing in a corner of the church. He is teaching a hymn to the man next to him. As we get used to the light we are amazed by the beautiful fresco's on the walls. The entrance of the church is at the west side. Right at the east end of the church, the direction for the prayers, a huge fresco of the face of Christ is peacefully overlooking the church. This is the kind of church that makes both believers and non believers feel humble, spiritual and warm and in close contact to whatever force people choose to honour.

The development of this story might resemble the development of the country Georgia. Maybe a little grim at first but hopeful at the end. After the civil war in 1991 Georgia is slowly getting back on it's feet. The start of this year's jazz festival is symbolic for the progress. I would love to be back here in a year or two and see how things have developed. Mikheil, the president of the Festival, gave us , together with his staff, a first class treatment. We would like to thank him and his staff, the Dutch Embassy in Moscow and the Fonds van de Podiumkunsten for their financial support.

