

Liner Notes

by Fawkes_07

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"Two Kings" by White Fort

Chapter 1 of 1

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In 1986, a professor at my college led a group of students on a trip to the Soviet Union, taking the Trans Siberian Railway from the Far East to Leningrad. I was lucky enough to go.

We stopped for 3 days in Irkutsk, Siberia, the "Pearl of the Orient." We visited a "repurposed" church (I don't recall if religion was *illegal* in Soviet Russia, but it was definitely frowned upon), which was now serving as an art museum. A local youth choir sang for us in this historic building with AMAZING acoustics. It was really a treat.

After the show, we were bused back to the hotel and fed, then a bunch of us took a walk along the riverfront. Who should we run into but the choir who'd just performed for us--they'd had to hoof it home. I leave it to you to imagine the mutual curiosity amongst all these teens and twenty-somethings.

Only 2 or 3 people spoke both Russian and English, so direct communication was rather bottlenecked. At some point, though, we had a collective realization that we had music in common. We ended up singing together, there on the banks of the Angara River, "Yesterday" by the Beatles. In English. Awesome. They also taught us a folk song called "Katyusha," which I can still sing in Russian. Awesome. To top it all off, a group of Young Pioneers (think Communist Girl Scouts) walked by in their little uniforms just as we were going through our first full-length performance of "Katyusha." Those little girls started singing right along, with no idea they were joining in with a bunch of imperialist capitalists from the decadent West. Downright magical.

The next day, a few friends and I ended up wandering through Irkutsk by ourselves. We somehow ditched the scheduled afternoon event to go shopping--I wanted to get a furry hat. Who should we run into on the sidewalk but one of the singers from last night: Artyom Yakushenko. Now, Artyom was smokin' hot by any standards, and he won me over by deciding on the spot to cut class in order to take us out on the town. My kind of guy!

One of the problems with Communism was that everyone got paid whether they worked or not. So, attracting customers was not necessarily seen as a Good Thing by many Soviet businesses. Particularly restaurants. If people came in to eat, that meant you had to actually cook and serve something, instead of playing cards or whatever. Who wants *that*?? We tourists frequently found ourselves starving if we missed the Official Dinner, because the average Soviet cafe was unmarked and had curtains drawn over the windows.

But now we were hanging out with a native. Artyom took us out *forblini*, pancakes topped with honey. I kid you not, the main entrance to the diner was a battered screen door behind the building, down an alley which I swear had a sign saying, "Beware of the Leopard." If you Weren't From Around There, you never would have found your way into this place.

I will never forget the fleeting moments when Artyom's knees bumped mine under that wobbly table covered with pancakes and honey. It felt like lightning passed through me every time. Did I mention he was a total hottie? I'm pretty sure I did.

That evening, we met back up with the groups and collectively hung out, singing *masse* and cornering the poor translators for questions. Then Artyom showed up with his "skreeka," a.k.a. violin.

Artyom made music like I'd never heard before or since. That whole "awww, he cut class to help me find a hat" business, even the "holy cow, jostling knees with a REALLY good looking guy under the table"... they all paled in comparison to the music. He played that violin with his whole body, and his soul came out of every note.

I was doomed. Hook, line, sinker. PWN'd. USSR 1, USA 0.

But we were On Tour, and to cross all of Russia in three weeks, you can't stop for long in any one place. Artyom and his friends came to the train station to see us off, and there was much exchanging of photos and addresses. Knowing he didn't speak English, I confidently told him I loved him during the last hug. No harm, no foul, eh?

Boy, was I shocked a few minutes later to hear Artyom's brother say, "I love you, Kate!" to one of the girls in our group. Hmm. Obviously there had been some English practice very recently at the Yakushenko household. To this day, I don't know if Artyom understood me or not--but either way, he didn't flinch, so it was All Good.

Months later, I got a letter from Artyom in the mail. I was so thrilled, I decided to send him some music. I hit the used record store and picked out as many albums (we're talking vinyl, here) as I could afford. Boxed them up, took them to the post office, discovered that postage for 5 LP's to Siberia made the cost of the albums kind of a moot point. Vowed to eat less that semester and mailed them anyway. Discovered afterward that in my consternation, I'd forgotten to put my response letter in the box.

Artyom sent me another letter that year (with thanks for the albums), but I never wrote him again. I was too chicken. I felt like a doofus for sending a package with no note in it, and by that point, the things I really wanted to say to him were, well, too personal to send through a translator. I just couldn't bring myself to open up, knowing that someone else, here or there, would read it and analyze it and present it to him in some Babelfished version that might not really say what I meant anymore. Too risky to entrust a stranger with something so precious. Too honest and raw to entrust to someone I knew.

I took the easy way out and just stepped back from him.

Fast forward to 2011. One evening, I went looking through my photo albums (analog, of course, this was the '80's) and came across a picture of Artyom and I. Wow! Proof in living color that I was once skinny AND I knew a cute guy. Naturally I scanned it and uploaded it to my Facebook profile.

"Huh," I sez, "I wonder if Artyom's on Facebook." Why not check? The little Search box is right there at the top of the page.

I type "A-R-T." Artie the Dinosaur shows up below the box as a suggestion. Ha ha. I keep typing. "Artem [space]" brings up a slew of guys from countries outside the US... how encouraging! By the time I get to "Artem Yakush" there's one suggestion, and I recognize the face.

And so I found my Siberian Sweetie after 25 years.

Artyom, who learned English on the streets of Brooklyn, has come a long way from Irkutsk. He met Yuriy Matveyev, and embarked on a distinguished musical career in his home country. They've played all over the world, from trance clubs in Ibiza to the Lincoln Center in NYC. They released almost a dozen albums in Russia before they split up in 2009--for reasons they won't discuss.

Artyom still plays his violin with the same dizzying intensity as he did at 17.

So that's the story of this album. It was originally released in Russia in 2004. Artyom and Yuriy entrusted me with the master recordings, so I could share it with the rest of the Western hemisphere. I asked them for that privilege, because I believe their music is a gift of pure beauty to the whole human race.

Artyom set my heart afire 25 years ago, and that flame has never gone out. I hope he will do the same to you right now.

Enjoy.

Sounds like fanfic, doesn't it? "Mary Sue," even! But every word is true. The album is called "Two Kings" and their band is called White Fort--"Belyi Ostrog" in Russian. It's on iTunes now and should be on Amazon within a week or so. I didn't think it was appropriate to include links here on TPP, but a quick search will bring it up if you're interested.

These liner notes will only appear on the download version of the album. For the CD, I formatted all the cover art and put some gorgeous pictures of both guys in the CD booklet. Yuriy has SUCH a pretty smile, and Artyom is still the sexiest man I've ever met. He is driving me crazy when we Skype. Poor Hubby is glad "Tom" lives in Moscow, on the other side of the planet, and I have to admit, that's a **really** good thing.

If you go to YouTube and look up the channel for "CoolHatRecords," I have about 30 videos of the band, which people have uploaded from Russian TV over the years. I **highly** recommend the one titled "Mudra," on the playlist titled "Artyom Yakushenko." Hamina, hamina, hamina. He ROCKS that "Dexter" shirt! Go watch it--seriously, you won't regret it.

So yeah, "Fair Exchanges," "Private Lessons," and "Looking and Seeing" have been seriously on hold... I swear I have the plot outlined for all three of them, I just can't find the time. I keep stumbling into good causes, like founding an art center, building a community radio station, and helping my 25-year crush sell his music. Sheesh.

Love,

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