

VALERY PONOMAREV, trumpet

FROM MOTHER RUSSIA TO THE BROTHERHOOD OF BOP

July 1993 *Hot House Profile* by Gene Kalbacher

TWENTY YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, the trumpeter Valery Ponomarev realized the major goal that would make all the others possible. On July 31, 1973, using fake documents arranged by some Jewish friends, Ponomarev escaped his native Russia. Three months after arriving in New York City, he met another goal when he sat in with Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers, literally his dream band. Three years later, in 1976, he officially joined the Messengers, replacing Bill Hardman and beginning a four-year association during which he would record nine albums and tour the world.

This month [July 1993] Ponomarev, now a U.S. citizen, will achieve two more much-anticipated milestones: His quintet, Universal Language, will play its first weeklong engagement at a major Manhattan jazz club, July 13-18 at Sweet Basil, site of numerous Messengers gigs and albums, and the trumpeter will record his first live album as a leader. "Every jazz musician, at one time or another, would like to record a live album," says Ponomarev, 50, from his home in the city. "For jazz, it's the best representation of the spirit of the musical form."

At Basil, Ponomarev expects to perform a batch of new material along with a few standards (including the ballad "I Thought About You" and "Theme For Ernie," once recorded by John Coltrane) in the company of pianist John Hicks, tenor saxist Don Braden, bassist Peter Washington and drummer Victor Jones. Ponomarev's previous recording, *Profile*, his third for Reservoir, garnered strong airplay in the metro area, thanks in part to the presence of tenorman Joe Henderson (caught at a creative and critical peak) and Kenny Barron (then, as now, the most sought-after pianist around), bolstered by a piledriving rhythm section of bassist Essiet Essiet and drummer Jones. In Hicks, who matches Barron in ubiquity, Ponomarev has an ex-Messenger pianist who "lifts you, who comes out of the tradition of music that, in Blakey's words, is a *collective* product," the leader relates. Braden, a cutting-edge player who distinguishes himself on singer Jeanie Bryson's debut CD and on his own new *Wish List* for Criss Cross, impresses Ponomarev because "he's not just spilling out changes, he's *expressing* something, always on purpose."

In much the same way that we remember where we were and what we were doing when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, Ponomarev recalls the exact moment he first heard modern jazz. "I had been playing gigs at music college and dance bands," he remembers. "I was 18, and a friend invited me over to his place to hear something he had taped off the radio. When I got there, he said nothing, just pushed the button and out came 'The Blues Walk' by Clifford Brown [from his 1955 quintet with Max Roach]. *God Almighty!* I was swept off my feet. That was exactly the music I was searching for. I literally couldn't live without the music."

From that moment on, Ponomarev dedicated his life to hard bop. Finding LPs was "virtually impossible" in Russia under the Brezhnev regime, but the trumpeter did manage to buy a few on the black market. *Study in Brown* and *Dinah* [Washington] *Jams* each cost him a month's salary. And after hearing the Art Blakey Quintet's *A Night at Birdland*, a 1954 live date featuring Brown, he set his sights on becoming, one way or another, a Jazz Messenger. Employing what psychologists now call "positive visualization," Ponomarev transcribed "tons and tons" of trumpet solos by Brown and later Messengers Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard. "To achieve something," he explains, "you have to know exactly what it is and have a clear image of it. I loved Blakey's music so much, and had practiced it so long, that I had a clear image of myself playing with Blakey. [In Russia], in my mind, I was already part of the band."

A few months after escaping Russia and landing in Manhattan, Ponomarev found himself standing next to his hero Blakey at a Messengers gig at the Five Spot. He was prepared. He knew what he would say to his prospective employer, he knew all the music. He had everything down pat--or so he thought. "When I was introduced to him, I said, 'I'm from Russia, I play trumpet.' And he said, 'So, *where's* your trumpet?'" The next night, having grasped Jazz Lesson No. 1 and overcome his embarrassment, he brought his horn, sat in with the band, earned a hug from Blakey and laid the groundwork for his eventual membership in the Messengers family.

Working with Blakey also reinforced a precept he had learned in Russia--the importance of vocalization. Explains Ponomarev: "We're born with an instrument, the vocal cords. Art Blakey would tell a trumpet player or a tenor player, 'I want you to *sing* this melody.' To play music, to play melody lines over changes, you have to know what you're doing, you have to *hear* the music. Once you *hear* it, you can sing it. Knowing the lyrics to a song is very important. Literally, I can vocalize every note I play on trumpet. Sometimes on gigs I pick up the microphone and literally sing what I would have played on trumpet. Art once heard me vocalizing over changes. He looked at me, stunned, and said, 'Valery, you should do a record like that--it'll be your greatest achievement.'" (On one bonus track of his 1985 debut as a leader, *Means of identification*, just issued on CD, he sings a creditable version of a Russian Christmas song.)