

## Old Grey Goose International On the Road in Ukraine



November 1- 10, 2015

**Jeff McKeen:** accordion, guitar, mandolin and the bones

**Doug Protsik:** fiddle, piano, ukulele and accordion

**Eric Rolfson:** guitar, mandolin, harmonica and upright bass  
**Bennett Konesni:** guitar, banjo, harmonica and upright bass

**Sunday / Monday, November 1 -2**



The Goose left for Kiev, Ukraine on November 1 via bus to Boston, and Air France to Paris, connecting into Kiev. We were in Ukraine thanks to the Counselor for Public Affairs, Conrad Turner, with whom we had worked in Kyrgyzstan a dozen years ago. The flights were tight (from a seating perspective) and late on the tail end.

We were picked up at the Kyiv Boryspil airport by Cultural Affairs Assistant Anna Sumar and arrived at our hotel with one hour to spare before a scheduled press conference at Ukrinform, on Bogdana Khmelnytskogo Street.

Hotel Ukraina overlooks the scene of a prolonged protest and deadly confrontation with riot police that left approximately 200 students dead in Maydan Square just over two years ago. It also brought down the government and led to the annexation of Crimea which has seen another 8,000 perish. The on-going moving and tragic story is well depicted in the documentary "Winter on Fire" available on Netflix.



Although we'd been on the road 20 hours, the press conference was quite enjoyable. We played six or seven songs and then answered questions. They wanted to know more about Maine, our instruments, our other international travel, our professions (in addition to music) and how long we had been a musical group. We told them that we had been playing music together in various formations for more than 40 years--before we were either old or grey!

Following the conference, Anna took us to a dinner spot where we ate traditional (and delicious) Ukrainian food, including cabbage rolls and chicken soup. Much of this part of the city is underground, similar to Montreal, and we walked to the restaurant via these passages while returning to the hotel above ground.

Underground, one could find food, shops, currency changers and buskers.



One gets the sense of a European city with little crime, residential housing downtown, and a cleaned up Maydan Square.

There are many shrines to the students and supporters who fell to former President Yanukovich's Berkut (sp?) shock troops and, a good number of young people were soliciting support for both their families and the Ukrainian troops still fighting the Russians in the South.





**Tuesday, November 3**

We had a chance to catch up on sleep before meeting Anna at 1:00 PM to head for the Jazz and Modern Music Art School located at 7 b Chelyabinska Street. The school offers music classes for ages five and above, and the director played Jazz piano in many countries before becoming involved with the school.

The audience was great, and the students were full of questions about how old we were when we started to play music; where Maine is located; the kinds of traditional instruments we play; etc. Two of the young teachers and the director joined us for a jam session at the end, and the director played piano for a blues in D.



Following the performance the director and principal invited us to their office for a snack of fruit, tea, cognac and chocolate. We presented them with Old Grey Goose, Ukraine 2015 hats and headed back to the hotel to change for the evening concert. From there we went to a Spanish restaurant for a delicious meal before heading to the evening's performance venue for a sound check.

The concert was held at the Big Hall of Musical Academy on Horodetskogo Street, a short walk from the hotel. It seats around 800 people, and we estimated that about 650 - 700 attended, nearly filling the floor seats and both balconies.

We had a good sound man, and the audience was very enthusiastic. Our 1.5 hour set list included:

Silver Bells'  
Midnight Special  
Rabbit on a Log  
Going to the Barn Dance Tonight  
Scandinavian Medley  
Cape Cod Girls  
Battle of New Orleans  
House of the Rising Sun (immediately recognized with applause)  
Casey Jones  
Flop Eared Mules (very close to a Ukrainian song)  
Hey Good Lookin'  
Amazing Grace (sung largely a cappella in the shape note tradition)  
Worried Man Blues





Oh, You Ukraine Girls, Can't You Dance the Polka (which Doug did with one of them)

We were called out for an encore and a large number of the diverse audience stayed behind for photos with us and to get autographs.

As we were leaving, a lovely family mentioned they were Jewish, so we played and sang Hava Nagila (a song originally from the Ukraine) in the lobby, much to their delight.

Back at the hotel we decompressed at the bar until midnight and were able to get another good night's sleep before our 11:15 AM rendezvous with Anna and our terrific driver Sergei.

### **Wednesday, November 4**

Our first performance today was at Concert at School #168. This is the only school in Kyiv that supports "inclusive" education, and the Embassy supports a language program there for disadvantaged and handicapped children.

The room was packed, and the kids were wonderful. We played for 35 minutes and answered questions for another 20, one of which was, "Can you play Yellow Submarine?" which we did.



We left the school and went to a Georgian restaurant for a late lunch. There we feasted on delicious traditional food masterfully ordered by Anna. Katie also joined us. She had been an intern when we last saw her in Poland and is now working full-time for the Foreign Service.



Multiple courses appeared, including

Cheesy bread with egg yolks in the middle

Individual patties of carrot, beef and spinach with a walnut base

The best salad Smokey can remember eating

A hot veggie dish that included eggplant, potato and tomato, among other things

Cheese, lamb and beef dumplings

A plate of pickled vegetables including garlic, garlic scapes, tomatoes, traditional pickles, and hot peppers

Pivo (beer) and Espresso



Our engagement that evening was at the America House on Pimonenko Street where we were scheduled to perform and present a workshop on American folk music. The building had been beautifully renovated and, after security worthy of an Embassy, we entered to find a small but full room of eager Ukrainians interested in learning more about the United States.

We played music and answered questions, then called a couple dances. No one wanted to leave at 9:00 PM when the Center was due to close, and we took a number of photos with the young people and invited them to tomorrow's concert.



Eric, Bennet and Smokey took a stroll following the concert and found a German Brew Pub where we had refreshments and four kinds of sausages made "using German technology."

**Thursday, November 5**

Our first engagement today was at the Pedagogical University, Institute of Arts on Turgenivska Street, where we played for a full classroom of future music teachers.

They were a great group, very enthusiastic, and understood much musically. Doug



played a beautiful piano at the end of the performance, and we had to hurry out before the next "formal" class started.

We walked to a Lebanese restaurant and feasted on traditional dishes before returning to the hotel for an hour and a quarter rest before our next performance.

Tonight's concert was the best of the tour, thus far. We gathered at the Honchar Museum on Lavrska Street, which is a museum of folklore, and two Ukrainian bands were invited to share the stage with us. Each brought their own contingent of fans and a number of people who had heard us play elsewhere showed up, as well.



We played five songs, and then the other bands took the stage, one after the other. They were terrific playing fiddles, cello, drum, and a hammer dulcimer-like instrument. The crowd was lively and enthusiastic, and we were grabbed as partners to dance, which went on for hours.



At one point, they played a game whereby the leader wielded a leather strap and did different movements that everyone had to imitate while circling him. If you missed imitating him three times, you received a lick with the strap, and it was your turn to lead. Eric, giggling the entire time, video-taped the rest of the Geese, who played the game.

Eventually, all the bands were on stage, and we alternated teaching and calling American and Ukrainian dances, which had remarkable similarities--including line dances, circle dances and marches.

It was a great scene, with enthusiastic children and adults of all ages cavorting and socializing all evening. Following the event, photos and farewells, the director invited us upstairs for food, drink and song.

It was cozy and lovely with about 20 people sitting at a long table exchanging toasts and songs and appreciating one another's music and cultures.



We were back at the hotel at midnight and had to pack for a 6:30 AM departure to Poltava, five hours by car to the east.



**Friday, November 6**

Our first stop, half-way to Poltava was at a small Auberge where we feasted on pork fat with garlic (a national favorite), beets with garlic, paté, and cheese, meat and cabbage dumplings.

The trip was through beautiful farmland with rich, dark soil. Since it is late in the season, the only crop we saw was sugar beets. We noted that while there were extensive, well maintained fields, there were very few farmhouses, and assume that this was due to the collective farming and oppression, of the Soviet era.

We arrived in Poltava in the late morning and checked into the Alleya Grand hotel on Zhovtneva Street, right across from the venue where we were to do our major concert that evening.



We were joined for lunch and the rest of the trip by Cultural Affairs Office Sheryl Bistransky who, like Anna, is a true professional and a lovely person. We left for School #17 which turned out to be an elite, and very impressive school of the Humanities where 98% of the students continue with university studies. This compares with about 30% nationally. They teach approximately 1,000 students, ages six to 17, and have a dedicated faculty, with a student/faculty ratio of approximately 10:1.

We were greeted by a contingent of students bearing ceremonial bread (similar to our experience in Central Asia), and they recited a poem of welcome in English for us.



We played in the auditorium and answered student questions that were all asked in very good English.

Following our performance, one of the students sang for us, and we surmised that if we came back in four or five years, she would be a national pop star.





Following the performance we had tea, sandwiches and bread (that was baked at the school) in the director's office.

We had some free time at the hotel before leaving for the Lystopad concert hall across the street from the hotel, where we made our way for a sound check. The venue holds about 1,200 seats, and by the time we began the concert, it was full.

The crowd was welcoming and enthusiastic, and we played the following set list:

Silver Bells / Snow Deer  
Barn Dance  
Blues Stay Away From Me  
I's the Bye  
Scando Medley  
Worried Man Blues  
Star of the County Down  
The Lumberjack's Alphabet  
Banjo Set (Soldier's Joy / Liberty)

Hey Good Lookin'  
Ukraine Medley (Flop Eared Mule / Hava Nagila  
Pancho and Lefty  
Casey Jones  
Bow and Strings  
Can't You Dance the Polka (Oh, You Ukraine Girls)

Encore: Fisher's Hornpipe /

Following the concert, we signed autographs and took photos with many in the audience, then returned to the hotel for a late supper.

Sherry and Sam, a warm and wonderful man whom Anna hired to help with logistics, joined us, and we had an enjoyable evening sharing stories, drink and delicious food.

### Saturday, November 7



We left the hotel at 10:30 AM and went to the Poltava Oblast Research Library on Lenina Street to perform and talk about American folk music. There were 40 or 50 in the audience, and after playing and answering questions, we got them to dance.

We had a tour of the facility following the concert and saw the library that was full of American posters, DVD's (including "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?" and resource materials.



Three young people, including Anastasia, who had studied her senior year of high school in Wisconsin, accompanied us for a walk through Old Poltava, which had recently celebrated its more than 1100 years of existence. We walked through a park and a very European pedestrian thoroughway to a Russian Orthodox Church and an overlook of the city, where a couple was celebrating their wedding.



We stopped at a beer house and ate delicious borsht, latke, dumplings and local beer. Some of us had "green borsht" that was made with sorrel and was served in a dark bread bowl. We exchanged stories and riddles and had a lovely time.



As we were walking, a couple of young ladies shyly said hello and then ran back to us to ask if they could take a photo. It turns out that they had been at the concert the night before.

The three and a half hour ride to Sumy was challenging, as the roads were worse than any in Maine during mud season, and the van, although a Mercedes, had the worst possible seats, making sleeping or getting comfortable nearly impossible. We joked that whomever designed them must have gotten a job doing the same for the airlines thereafter.





On the way back, Anastasia disappeared into a store and we thought we'd lost her, but just before our final photograph before climbing into the van, she reappeared out of breath with local chocolates which she sweetly presented to us for our four-hour ride to Sumy, just 15 km from the Russian border.

Arriving in Sumy in the early evening, we stayed at the Hotel Shafran where we ate well, including grape leaves with lamb filling and rabbit in a cream sauce. Sam gave us a Russian billiards lesson which was fascinating, given that the pockets vary in size and one of the strategies is to sink the cue ball!

### **Sunday, November 8**

We left the hotel at 10:30 AM for the Windows on America Center at the Sumy Oblast Research Center on Stalinhgradu Street.

We played for 45 minutes, answered questions for another 15, then called a couple dances. We met Sarah, who grew up in the Rockland / Camden area and actually

knows Bennett's mom! She gave us a tour of the city along with the official tour guide provided by the city.



Following lunch we gave a small press conference at the Municipal Gallery on Soborna Street, then headed for the evening's sound check after a brief stop at the hotel to change.

The Frunze Palace of Culture theatre on Gorkogo Street was smaller than the other two at which we had performed formal concerts, holding about 600. It was filled to capacity, and they had stopped giving out tickets.

This town's audience turned out to be the most enthusiastic of three cities--this in a country about which we can say the same of the more than a dozen in which we've performed. They cheered and clapped in unison during and in-between numbers when they were particularly excited about a song. Their enthusiasm animated us and we gave one of our best performances of the trip.



The songs we played included:

Silver Bells / Snow Deer  
Midnight Special  
River Driver  
Eight More Miles to Lewiston  
St. James Infirmary  
Ukraine Medley (Flop Earned Mule and Hava Nagila)  
Going to the Barn Dance Tonight  
Haul on the Bowline  
Pancho and Lefty  
Hey Good Lookin'  
Casey Jones the Union Scab  
Banjo Medley (Soldier's Joy / Liberty)  
House of the Rising Sun  
Lumberman's Alphabet  
Amazing Grace  
Oh, You Sumy Girls, Can't You Dance the Polka (Turns out they can!)

Encore: Fisher's Hornpipe

Following the performance, we took many photos with members of the audience and signed autographs before heading back to the hotel for a late dinner and bed around midnight.

Shane, an IT professional from DC whom we had met earlier in the day, was in Ukraine as a volunteer to help monitor the recent elections. He brought a contingent of FLEX students--Ukrainians who had been sponsored by the Embassy to study at various high schools in the US, including those in Missouri, New York, California and Nevada--to the concert.

## **Monday, November 9**

We left the hotel around 10:00 AM for the Sumy radio and TV station where we played three songs and did two separate TV interviews. We talked about the great reception we had received; the fact that in our international experience people have more in common than they have differences; that we travel and share our culture with others and, as importantly seek to learn about host country cultures, so that we can share what we learn with the people back home; that we were excited to collaborate with young Ukrainian musicians who seek to learn about and carry on their country's traditional music; and that we would be honored to return to continue the collaboration.



Following the press conference we left for the Sumy College of Arts and Sciences where we were asked to offer a "Master Class" for students studying classical music. They were one of the best audiences for whom we had the honor to play, and three of them performed for us on traditional, home-made instruments.

This was our last performance and was a capstone event, with many photos, autographs and exchanges of well wishes and promises to return. We were presented with posters they had made in honor of our visit as well as a painting one young lady gave us, having been inspired by our Windows on America engagement the previous day.

Following a long wait at a restaurant for a very late lunch, we piled into the van for a five-hour drive on pot-holed roads to Kiev. We passed the time telling Maine jokes, tales and anecdotes and were back at Hotel Ukraina before midnight.

The most humorous part of the ride was when we pulled into a rest stop and, like a NASCAR crew, threw on the original set of strings on the bass--the new ones we had used for the tour destined to reside on Bennett's bass in Belfast. What took us 45



minutes on the front end of the trip was accomplished in fifteen with the help of multiple Geese and their most understanding Embassy handlers. We only can imagine what the staff at the rest stop reported that night upon returning home!

**Tuesday, November 10**



We were up at 4:00 AM to leave for the Kyiv Boryspil airport for our KLM / Delta flight to Boston, via Amsterdam. Our terrific driver, Sergei picked us up and delivered us on time, despite four hours sleep and a very long week.

The great discovery of the day was that Amsterdam has the best, most friendly and efficient airport we have ever seen. Even the security staff was all smiles and politeness, all while putting us through an extremely thorough boarding process.

ON THE BUS TO MAINE AND LIFE IS GOOD!