

Burlington-born blues player introduces his sound to Russia

By BOB HANSEN

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There is a bit of the old troubadour in Pat Hazell. He harkens back to the medieval musicians that traveled the world playing the Top 20 of the 13th century at their castle gigs. But unlike those wandering minstrels whose stock and trade were dainty ditties and chaste love poems, Hazell deals in the down-and-dirty blues sound of the Mississippi Delta with a little boogie-woogie thrown in for good measure.

Burlington-born Hazell now hangs his harmonica in Washington, Iowa, but he remains a welcomed regular on the local music scene. His gravely voice and his piano's driving base line have brightened community events as well as a few watering holes and recently Hazell taught Burlington's church bells to sing one of his musical creations.

His music has also taken him far a field. He has made "more than a dozen" tours of Europe and South America where he both preformed and conducted workshops on the blues. However, nothing quite prepared him for a recent performance in a log cabin deep hidden in a snow covered birch forest of eastern Russia. His audience was the region's indigenous people whose music exposure did not extend much beyond their century-old chants.

Hazell's Russian adventure really begins in the late 1950s when the Burlington high school student found himself somewhat of a social outcast because he did not share his classmates' passion for rock-and-roll. While his classmates danced the night away at the Spider Web to the sounds of Elvis and Fats Domino, Hazell stayed home and twiddled the dial of his family's radio to pick up the music of Muddy Waters or Buddy Guy.

"The music that I listened to when I was in high school had a lasting affect on me," Hazell said. "I loved the blues and jazz with all the improvisations. It just seemed so creative. But, I have to confess I also liked classical music and in fact, the very first LP record I bought was by the pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Back then I had the dream that I would buy a sailboat and travel the world recording traditional music."

However, music carried Hazell in another direction. He gravitated to the blues and other forms of jazz — especially boogie-woogie — and it soon became obvious to the

young Burlingtonian that music was to be his life. He recruited a group of like-minded musicians and formed the popular group Mother Blues but the band has since disbanded and now Hazell tours as a single.

That touring took an exotic turn this November when Hazell was invited to Russia to perform and conduct sessions on the Blues — considered in Europe a unique form of American folk music. Hazell's invitation came through a meeting with a group of touring Russians that found themselves in Burlington.

"I met the Russians while they were visiting Burlington and in the course of conversation discovered that two of the members of the group — Nadia Utkina and Sergey Kungurov — were folk musicians. We played together and talked music and they invited me to come and visit them in Russia as part of a folk music cultural exchange," Hazell said. "It sounded interesting so I said I would consider it and they put the trip together for me.

"I flew into Moscow and was surprised by the reception I got. I ended up either playing or talking about folk music constantly. They were very enthusiastic about the music. I stayed with a man who is a top local television personality in Moscow and he really showed me a good time and arranged for me to play in some great places. I had no idea that I would be doing that much playing in Moscow."

Hazell then traveled by train about 1,000 miles to the city of Izhevsk in the Republic of Udmurtia. The city had long been off-limits to westerners because of its defense and research industries. His hosts lodged him at local university complex and Hazell began another demanding round of playing, teaching and talking music.

"There were workshops and discussions on the cultures of the Mississippi valley and then there was the music. Most of the sessions were at the university but I also played at a sort of 'disco' with three rock bands. At first, I wasn't really thrilled about playing there but it turned out to be a pretty nice looking bar and casino — much better than some of our local places. I would get on the stage and sing, play my harmonica and then the bands would join in and it was a lot of fun and the crowds seemed to appreciate it.

"One nice thing about it was that I was accepted by both the young and the old. Here in the states, the younger crowd thinks I'm just some old geezer up there on the stage," Hazell said.

Hazell's next Russian stop was the hometown of his host, Nadia Utkina, and this was a small village of log cabins nestled deep in the forests..... "It was like something out of one of those old Currier and Ives prints," Hazell explained. "It was snowing and

people were pulling sleds. At night they would gather in someone's home and there would be great Russian food and lots and vodka and then people sang."

"The villagers are ethnic Finno-Ugric and distinct from the Russians and they sang chants that sound a little like a medieval madrigals. One old grandmother stood up to sing a long epic chant that someone has to record. It was an unbelievable musical experience. Then Sergey Kungurov, who plays a string instrument called a kresh, and I played together and that proved to be popular because they had never heard music like that."

Hazell hopes to recapture some sense of that musical evening in the Russian forest and is now busy in his Washington recording studio composing a number of songs based on the sounds he collected there. He also hopes to return to Russian to do a bell project utilizing the Orthodox churches of Izhevsk and perhaps return to the village for another dose of Finno-Ugric chants.