

# Mr. Smith Goes to Bucharest: Fulbright Scholar's Return Energizes Romanian Jazz Musicians

An interview by Jason West

When I first spoke to Tom Smith, during the summer of 2002, I considered him a curiosity. Professor Smith—a trombonist and Director of Instrumental Music at Pfeiffer University, near Charlotte, North Carolina—had accepted the position of Senior Fulbright Professor of Music at the Romanian National University, a six-month teaching gig in Bucharest, Romania. Armed with only a cursory knowledge of the Romanian language, Smith, along with his wife and teenage son, planned to venture into a virtual jazz wasteland, undeterred by the fact that Romanian jazz musicians lacked discipline, written music, playable instruments, and—most importantly—self-confidence.

A year later I heard from the professor, and could hardly believe the news. Smith had collected donations from contacts in America and Europe for over \$30,000 worth of music, recordings, improvisational methods and supplies. He had directed the student big band in a nationally televised broadcast at the first-ever Bucharest International Jazz Festival. He had staged a gala history of jazz concert, sponsored by the American Cultural Center,

unveiling his newly formed Romanian National Jazz Ensemble to a capacity crowd. He was awarded the 2003 Romanian National Radio Music prize for jazz, and most importantly, he had accepted another six-month tour of duty (from January to June, 2004) at the National University in Bucharest.

Almost overnight, Tom Smith jump-started a rag-tag jazz program, quintupled enrollment, and instilled a measure of confidence and poise in musicians who were generally considered second-rate hacks, kilometers behind the classical musicians in respectability and reputation.

The curious professor with his melodious trombone and southern drawl had become an overseas hero—a goodwill ambassador of America's original music. His is a remarkable story, and it's not over.

**Jason West:** *What were your expectations at the beginning of your initial Fulbright in Bucharest?*

**Tom Smith:** In all candor, not very high. Although I was

well aware of some high quality musicians, I knew that the Romanian jazz infrastructure was almost nonexistent. It was like dealing with a great team without uniforms or a stadium. The whole thing was a big mess. Most of my trepidation came from the email contact I had initiated with the Romanian jazz community. Romania is a very strange place regarding issues of national pride. In fact Romania



Tom Smith leads Romanian National University Big Band in December 4, 2002.

may be the only European country in need of MORE nationalism. Most Romanians harbor low opinions of their own personal accomplishments and activities. They are a dazed, mentally fatigued population, and the jazz community is no exception. In fact, some of the email letters were desperate enough to use as means for securing free music-related

## Mr. Smith Goes to Bucharest

donations. One bassist in particular wrote a letter desperate enough to forward to the attention of Jamey Aebersold. A few days later, he sent over a box of materials from his publishing company. Pretty soon, a number of companies followed suit. This was the beginning of everything.

**West:** Describe the National University of Music (the conservatory) jazz program when you first arrived there in the fall of 2002.

**Smith:** I will never forget my first encounter with those guys. I actually entered the university incognito on their first day of school. Like many places in the States, administration was staging an orientation forum/concert for the whole student body. I sat there for about an hour, and during that time, I heard some very good classical music. This of course did not surprise me. The Romanian National University of Music is a major European conservatory with over a thousand students. I fully expected to hear great classical violinists and pianists, and I was not disappointed. After a time, there was a break, prompting me to believe everything was over. Just as people were beginning to stand, a jazz quartet staggered on the stage in a haphazard manner. They were dressed as if they didn't care, and talked on stage as if no one was in the audience. Uh oh, I thought. This could go very badly. Then a tenor player counted off a tempo, and they were off. It was "Joy Spring," and they played it very well. I was so relieved, since their demeanor had demonstrated another very possible

outcome. When it was over, they all forgot to bow and the drummer knocked over the microphones with his high-hat stand. This took my mind off the fact that he was only wearing one shoe. The audience was half impressed, half confused. For that matter, so

was I. That first encounter was a real message. From that moment forward I knew what my job was all about. These guys had to get organized and professional. Moreover, the process had to be fast, because I was uncertain if I could put up with too much of that stuff. Those first few months were a real war of wills. Not one of them owned a watch—not a one. They thought it was their God-given right as recently freed men to appear for rehearsals at any time that suited them. In those first few days, you would hear ten cell phones ring at once, and suddenly the music would stop. I thought I was going to kill them all. Then one day there was a breakthrough. One of the more enlightened musicians started taking notes every time I demonstrated something. Then he would gaze attentively at the behavior of his colleagues, and start taking more notes. I had

no idea what he was doing, but you can probably imagine the things that ran through my mind. Finally after three days of this, the guy supervised a huddle with the other guys, and then walked towards me grinning like a crazy man. "Professor Smith, my colleagues and I have considered your comments

**These people will join the European Union in 2007, meaning that all Romanians will be able to work anywhere within the borders of the EU (and) anyone from the EU will be allowed to work in Romania. If the Bucharest musicians continue their divisive undisciplined ways, there will instead be a sudden reverse migration TO ROMANIA. Leading the charge will be German, Dutch and Hungarian jazz musicians, tired of waiting their turns in saturated, overly competitive markets. Once these guys discover that slightly above average musicians can get television contracts in Bucharest, the floodgates will open.**

## Mr. Smith Goes to Bucharest

regarding the strong suggestion that we be silent during repetitions (rehearsals). To our delight we have discovered that when we are quiet, the music does in fact improve.” I was astonished. To him, this revelation had been the equivalent of an epiphany. “Do my colleagues concur?” he shouted to the others in the room. “We concur!” they all shouted back in unison. “Very well professor, we will never talk during the repetitions ever again.” And you know what? They never did. All of this now seems like a very long time ago. In the present they behave like any collegiate big band musicians from the West and the quality of their performances demonstrate that.

**West:** *Did you find it difficult to adjust to Romanian culture, language, people?*

**Smith:** English is pretty easy to speak within the intellectual circles of Bucharest. Initially, I was prepared to speak Romanian. But usually, my people always want to practice their English on me. For the most part Romania is a very comfortable country. Everything is inexpensive here, and food is plentiful. There is also a very practical and cheap transportation infrastructure in Bucharest. Romania does suffer from a crippling bureaucracy. It infiltrates all aspects of life—and it drives me nuts.

**West:** *How were you treated by the old guard versus the younger players?*

**Smith:** I am treated great by both groups. People here have never seen the western traditions related to versatility. They stereotype even more than we do in the States. So they are surprised that I enjoy playing all the styles equally, and with any group that plays them well. Romanian jazz musicians want you to be straight with them. For the most part, they are a

pretty suspicious lot. There are so many people trying to scam them, enough that when you treat them with honesty, they love you forever. Anyone who comes into Bucharest with ulterior motives is thrown out on his ear.

**West:** *You returned to Bucharest in January 2004. Why quit your job and return to a chaotic situation?*

**Smith:** When I left Bucharest the last time, I felt there was much unfinished business to attend to. Before this Fulbright adventure I had initiated something like 40 community and regional jazz and wind ensembles. In all previous cases, there had been some type of conclusive outcome. Sometimes the outcome was not



Two trombonists: Romanian Marin Soare (left) and American Tom Smith (right)

to your liking, but it was an outcome nonetheless. In this case, I felt like I had run like crazy, saw the finish line over the horizon, then stepped off to have dinner while the whole thing finished out on its own. Something about that outcome bothered me. I was especially concerned about the future of the Romanian jazz musician. These people will join the European Union in 2007, meaning that all Romanians will be able to work anywhere within the borders of the EU. Now, it goes without saying that many of these guys think they will cross into Hungary, and suddenly there will be hundreds of high paying gigs for the asking. My concern is just the opposite. The flipside of the Romanian dream is that anyone from the EU will be allowed to work in Romania. At present all those large, high paying Elton John- Whitney Houston-type shows (where the role of backup musician always goes to the versatile jazz musician) stop at Budapest before turning back to head west. After EU ascension, Bucharest will

## Mr. Smith Goes to Bucharest

be a regular venue. This will also coincide with a proposed superhighway extending from Budapest to Bucharest. If the Bucharest musicians continue their divisive undisciplined ways, there will instead be a sudden reverse migration TO ROMANIA. Leading the charge will be German, Dutch and Hungarian jazz musicians, tired of waiting their turns in saturated, overly competitive markets. Once these guys discover that slightly above average musicians can get television contracts in Bucharest, the floodgates will open, rest assured. I believe there is the very real chance of a future Romanian musical culture devoid of Romanian musicians. Sadly, Bucharest will have brought this unfortunate turn of events upon itself. I hear all the time about musicians who say “we will pass a law to keep this from happening to Romanians.” But the EU scenario does not operate that way. Most Bucharest musicians live in a dream world. They will be powerless to stop the EU juggernaut. This situation also applies to the Bucharest classical musicians, who are probably the most undisciplined in Europe. After all, what conductors will tolerate rehearsal tardiness and cell phones, when they can recruit westerners who are willing to work like Prussians?

**West:** *How would you summarize your second, six-month residency in Bucharest?*

**Smith:** This past Fulbright residency has run the gamut of progress and emotions. I rejuvenated the National Jazz Ensemble, conducted and greatly improved the Radio Big Band, and at the conservatory

I established a jazz vocal group and a second big band. I also continued my lectures about jazz and their correlations with American culture at the University of Bucharest. I performed at several of Romania’s international jazz festivals and became a regular fixture at the Green Hours and Art Jazz clubs, performing a variety of combo concerts, most often with Mircea Tiberian, Vlaicu Golcea, Garbis Dedian, Mihai Iordache and Cristian Soleanu. At last, the



Romanian National Radio Broadcast

conservatory big bands (very strong groups now) will receive course credit in the fall, as a result of regular afternoon big band concerts in the George Enescu hall, including a well received Ellington concert that featured Johnny Raducanu. On a personal note, my fourteen year old son Matt’s experiences here and his studies with Romania’s preeminent drummer Vlad Popescu have turned him into an amazing young jazz drummer. Moreover, my wife taught English to Turkish kids at an international school, and after years of searching, found her true calling. This story is not over, not by a long shot.

To find out more about Tom Smith in Romania visit his web site: [www.thsmith.com](http://www.thsmith.com).

*This article was originally printed in Allaboutjazz.com.  
Jason West is a music journalist living in Seattle. His email is: [jwest@allaboutjazz.com](mailto:jwest@allaboutjazz.com)*