

## **The Tube Collective**

*by Jill Bourgeois*

There is a group of men who, when they are together, live in a strange world of their own. They wear matching leopard-skin fezzes, have fake Bulgarian names and feign Bulgarian accents. These men make guitar amplifiers, guitar amplifiers as odd as themselves. They meet in their garages and create these things out of old organ guts, suitcases, and whatever else they can find that amuses them. This club is called the Tube Collective and my dad is one of the members. This particular meeting was held at the garage of Niels Nielsen, founder and chief of the Tube Group. Dad and I arrived and were greeted by the open garage door emitting a warm yellow light. My breath rose in little white puffs and my sweatshirt, all of a sudden, felt very thin in the chilly night air.

The garages that they meet in are like museums – messy museums, but very interesting. Everything in them revolves around their hobby. The guys in the club all play instruments, and when they get together, they love to play each others amps to see how they sound. The amps themselves are made out of the oddest things – things that most people would take for junk. The guys all take great care in the appearance of their amps as well. No two are ever alike.

Soon Niels himself came out to greet us. At first sight, you wouldn't take him for a mad scientist, but I quickly understood where all the stories came from. He is eccentricity at its finest. "Welcome comrades," he said as he greeted us in his fake Bulgarian accent. He proceeded to give me the grand tour of the garage, or the "gulag" as he sometimes calls it. A small mountain of suitcases was piled against one wall. The workbench was covered with strange electrical-looking things that I was too afraid to ask about. There was an old microphone rewired with new microphone electronics, I looked up to discover that the rafters were filled with more things. There were more suitcases, a lawn chair, and a huge Turkish rug. Then there was Didi. She is the mannequin head that Niels bought at a garage sale. Didi was named after a mysterious Bulgarian pop singer about whom no one knows anything, except for the one vinyl album on which she sung in the 1960's. She wears a leopard-skin fez that Niels made for her, as well as a fox boa. She is the mascot of the Tube Collective.

Niels then showed me to the Inner Sanctum--a tiny room half-hidden in the back of the garage. Dust covered everything. Old cobwebs were strung in the corners, the floor was sprinkled with dust and bits of wire and scraps of suitcases. Screws and bolts and half-finished amps littered the workbench. Table saws and strange homemade lamps sat glaring down at us.

As we emerged from the laboratory, the first of the group showed up. They call him Wingnutski, he came wearing his leopard-skin fez and carrying a previous creation of Niels – once a space heater, now a black and red-flamed amplifier. Before too long, two other comrades showed up. They were Johnski and Mikhail (who came sporting leopard-skin earmuffs as well as his fez). Soon they all decid-

ed to play some music, and the sounds of two guitars, a bass, and a harmonica tuning up filled the garage. The frigid night air gave it a raw sharp sound. The sight of four men in fezzes playing some blues in a dusty garage on an autumn night felt slightly surreal as I sat huddled against the wall, listening while I tried to stay warm. The tubes in the amplifiers were glowing orange as they played. One of the amplifiers, which was not quite finished, crackled and popped like a log fire.

Many of the amps that the Tube Collective makes are composed of old organ tubes and electronics, but sometimes they make them out of other things like old radios and reel-to-reel tape decks. Mikhail even brought the makings of one that was made out of an old jukebox. I had to laugh at their reaction as he brought it out. "It's so pretty!" "Look at all those pretty tubes!" they all exclaimed. They hooked it up and then marveled at the sound for a time. I was lost.

When they are done rewiring a "new" amp, then they find something in which to place it. They put most of the amps inside old suitcases out of which they have cut openings for grills. Then they paint them and mount lights and knobs on them. Sometimes they paint their names or logos on them or they attach a nameplate of some sort like "High Fidelity" or "Galaxy."

The guys played most of the evening while I sat and wrote and enjoyed the music. The evening ended too soon, it was time to go. The Tube Group packed up their instruments and amps and said their goodbyes. Dad and I left soon after.

The Tube Collective is a very interesting group of men who enjoy art and music and technology and have a club dedicated to just that. They are strange, slightly eccentric men who make strange amplifiers in their garages. To truly understand what they do in full, one would have to visit one of their meetings for him or herself – a trip I would highly recommend.

(Credits: Jill Bourgeois - Wr.121-10 a.m. - 10/15/07 - Descriptive essay. She got a "A".)