

OUR FINEST HOUR

INTRODUCTION



PEACE CHILD THE MUSICAL

1984 to 1986: OUR FINEST HOUR

There are many moments in the history of Peace Child that could lay claim to being ‘Our Finest Hour’:

- the series of miracles that brought about the first performance in the Royal Albert Hall;
- the serendipities that enabled the US Premiere at the Kennedy Center, and the striking contrast between the disastrous dress rehearsal in the afternoon, and the pitch-perfect performance in the evening which made our Stage Manager assert. “This justifies my faith in God!”
- the amazing concatenation of events that led to our UN publication, *Rescue Mission : Planet Earth* being made at all in 6 short months, and go on to be translated into 23 languages and sell over half a million copies and appearing briefly on the New York Times best-seller list;

But for me, the time between our Summer of Love in San Francisco in 1984 through to the US-Soviet tour of Summer 1986 was the busiest and best time of Peace Child – truly OUR FINEST HOUR!

Not only did we succeed in making the *Peace Child* story come true by bringing the first Russian kids and rock band to the USA, we also blasted a massive hole in the Iron Curtain that nothing before or since has been able to repair. We engendered real friendships between the Russian and American members of the *Peace Child* casts some of which have lasted to this day. On top of this, we –

- made the [best documentary](#) we have of the Peace Child process;
- we built up around 50 chapters across the USA;
- we did the Moscow-Minneapolis TV Space Bridge in memory of Samantha Smith;
- we did a spectacular performance at the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara – *and* –
- we launched the UN Year of Peace with a star-studded Concert at London’s Royal Albert Hall

Such achievements would not have been possible without the courage and effort of some truly extraordinary young people and some inspirational adults who supported and cared for them. You will read about them in the pages that follow. I salute them all, and thank them for their efforts. May you be inspired by them to similar efforts today as, clearly, we all need to do a lot of work to unite our nations and rise to the challenges of the 21st Century which are, if anything, more daunting than those of the last.

David R Woollcombe, Founder & CEO, Peace Child International, 1980 to 2014

the place. Melissa tolerated the madness, but basically was waiting for some one to give her a script so that she could learn her lines.



She was an exceptionally talented young actress / singer. So I made it my business to get her engaged and interested in the issues: the danger of accidental Nuclear War; the threat from the Soviet Union; what it might be like to be a girl of her age there – what might she be thinking or doing about these issues over there. I got her to read Jonathan Schell's book, "The Nuclear Winter" – so that she could get a sense of the threat we were addressing in the play. And, overnight, she seemed to get it: she came back after the weekend a different person. She was on fire. Suddenly, she understood why we were doing this play: it was not just an opportunity to show-case her considerable talent. It was an opportunity to get Americans thinking about how we could end the Cold War. Poor Mark was gobsmacked when, in an improvisation they did that day, she laid into him like a harridan on speed: she had all the answers and a very convincing Russian accent. She laid into poor Mark: he was silenced. She ended up being brilliant at the democratic convention, and went on to be the 1st Peace Child to go to the USSR later that year. She played the lead in both the '85 and '86 tours – and was arguably the most effective Peace Child cast member of all time.

Also in this show, we used Nina Gallen to play our 1st female US President. This was appropriate as Geraldine Ferraro was the 1st female vice presidential candidate – and a Democrat! We had a small chorus – and we performed on the Arts Stage at the Democratic National Convention Trade Show. Alan Cranston and – to our delight – Carole King, dropped by to see the show, along with Dharaj Maxfield from the Theatre of All Possibilities in Santa Cruz – whose contribution to Peace Child would later prove tremendous.

See: [San Francisco Album](#), – prepared by Zizi Mott, whose daughter played the Story-teller. This is one of the loveliest records of any of the US Peace Child shows.

It was not surprising that the children were the most enthusiastic supporters of Peace Child:

What The Children Think...



Caitlin Siegel, Katya of the Peace Child Players Company, wrote:

"What I got from "PEACE CHILD" was a message of hope for my future: a message that allowed me to stop walking alone and frightened with blinders on; to turn and look around, - see the world as we know it now, and then imagine how it could be. To always keep ahead of you the thought that the world can be saved; to stop dividing people into different races and come to the human race; to face the problems of today and tomorrow together, while learning from the mistakes of yesterday so they won't be repeated. This is what being a Peace Child means to me."

As hundreds of letters and essays came in from around the country, we asked Caitlin to select those which said something to her.

"My suggestion for peace is for all the leaders of the advanced countries to have a big meeting and have nobody leave until a decision had been made about getting rid of all nuclear weapons."

David

"Doing "PEACE CHILD" was fun. Not to brag or anything but I think that this was the best program at this school, or anywhere else, especially when all these school kids can co-operate with each other. If this world was like our play, I know everyone would be more than happy."

Lisa

"How refreshing it might be if the "PEACE CHILD" could be played out on the world stage rather than that of the Roosevelt Middle School."

Erie Daily Times

"I think it would be very nice to go to Pittsburgh to spread Peace"

Jenny

"We must remember that it is not only weapons that destroy peace, but also people, drugs, alcohol and other things"

Debra

"How do I feel about "PEACE CHILD" right now? - Well I'm kind of glad that we did it because maybe the adults would stop and think what they are doing to each other, and what they are going to do to us - the children. Must we grow up hating each other too?"

Daniela

"As I sang - "Will I be the only survivor, lost in a world of burning fire!" all alone in the spotlight at center stage, it hit me how little could be left with no breeze, no sun, no friends no family just cold hard light and gagging smoke. How could we be this blind? We must reach out now to our Soviet brothers and sisters who want to live too. "Believe in me - I believe in you."

Valerie



"What would be my suggestion for peace throughout the world? I suggest that the play "PEACE CHILD" should be put on through the world so that everybody gets the word of peace."

Erin

"It helped me because I was kind of nervous to sing out in front of people but if a lot of kids around you are singing out, you will too."

Ethel

"Before I heard about "PEACE CHILD", I never really paid much attention to war. I just thought, "Let the leaders solve their own problems." Now I know that it's not only the leaders problem."

Hal

"PEACE CHILD" affects me in many different ways. 1) I really thought about peace. 2) I was happy, sad, full of laughter and at points my eyes were filled with tears. 3) In the production, I felt as if our world was a world of caring and sharing."

Terry

"Being in "PEACE CHILD" means a lot to me because it makes me feel that this really could happen in the near future and I hope that it turns out as good as the play did."

Pam

"Every time the production of PEACE CHILD" is on, I get a feeling I want peace all over the world. It changed my life in a way I can't explain. I feel I could love the world, but the world doesn't have the peace I wish it would have."

Bryon

"PEACE CHILD" has taught me that if we really want peace, there's still hope for it. If we tried, maybe our world could learn different ways of life, and how to be friends. We also can hope that the nuclear bomb will NEVER be used. I feel that if everybody in the world saw this play, they might give "peace" a second thought!"

Kim

"As a teenager in the 80's I'm usually very wrapped up in my own personal world - that is, myself, my family and friends, and what I'm going to do on my summer vacation. My involvement with "PEACE CHILD", however, has changed my perception of life. A sense of reality hit me. Forget planning for the summer, what about tomorrow. We live on a planet that could be destroyed instantly, without any warning. We need to live for each day and to work so we can see future days together in peace."

Michael

"Peace is defined in the dictionary as: 'a state of quiet and calm, especially public quiet and security. I hope we have this security some day, so that hopefully - possibly soon - we have a "Peace Day"."

Debra

In my opinion I don't think anything that can destroy the world can protect anyone... No one owns this earth. What right does anyone have to try to destroy it? We children have as much right to live as they do. I feel that if we work hard together we can change the fantasy "PEACE CHILD" into a reality."

Rhonda



Look at the quotes above! Back then, it was much less common for teachers to ask children what they think – and, of course, when Peace Child did – the flood gates opened, and torrents of advice and opinions flowed into the play. Sometimes – this was overdone, as in a famous performance in Ojai, California – where most of the cast spent the 2nd Act in floods of tears as they shared and improvised their opinions on peace, and how to create it. But if the children and their producers felt it appropriate

for their community, that was enough: it wasn't for us, the authors and composers, to tell them what was good for them.



Theatre of All Possibilities – Peace Child Show – 1985 (Dharaj Maxfield with the Top Hat!)

Chapters emerge: –

We hadn't seen this coming – but all of a sudden, Peace Child Chapters were emerging across the USA. Rochester, Santa Cruz, York Pennsylvania, TWO in Los Angeles!! It was amazing. And some – like the [Theatre of All Possibilities in Santa Cruz](#) were touring their shows, just as successfully as we were doing in Washington DC. Dharaj Maxfield had seen the show at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco – and realised that the goals of his Theatre of All Possibilities were precisely aligned with those of Peace Child. We were so fortunate that we had his talents – and those of his great theatre company – to advance the Peace Child process and message up and down the West Coast. They also started a tradition –adopted by several other chapters – of celebrating the [UN's International Day of Peace](#). (21st September)

This idea was adopted by several other chapters and was developed by other organisations like Peace One Day and Pathways to Peace into fully-fledged movements. Of course, the original inspiration for Peace Day came from Bernard Benson's *Peace Book* and David Gordon's *Peace Day* song which opens every *Peace Child* show. Other important chapters from which we have materials are the [Minnesota one](#) and the [Toronto Chapter](#). If any other chapters have archive material that they would like to be archived on this website, please send it to me: david@peacechild.org

The Festival Shows – 1985: –

I had been commuting back and forth to Moscow since 1983 – establishing connections with the authorities, artists and theatre people – massively helped by citizen diplomats like Cynthia Lazaroff, Anya Kucharev, Vladimir Posner, Misha Shevelov, Stas Namin and others. Together, we had hatched a plot to bring a US cast over to do a joint Soviet-American show as part of the Moscow World Youth

Festival – a deeply socialist event which brought young people together from all over the world to celebrate international socialism!

In order to balance the Communist colouring with which our involvement in the Moscow Festival would inevitably brand us, especially in the USA, our US directors encouraged us to send a Peace Child delegation to the Jamfest Festival of the Arts the US State Dept. was co-hosting in Kingston, Jamaica. Here's our report of that event:

JAMFEST85 WORLD YOUTH FESTIVAL OF ARTS KINGSTON, JAMAICA

Gritting her teeth, National Administrator, Lucia Effros, concedes: "On balance, I think it was worthwhile; but the trip was not without a good share of frustration . . ."

Lucia had assembled a crack team of Peace Child singers from Washington DC to create a Peace Child presence at JAMFEST 85 — A World Youth Festival of Arts, held to mark the International Year of Youth and timed to coincide with a major International Youth Conference in Kingston, Jamaica. Both conference and Jamfest had been dogged by bad press, a result of not-so-covert USIA financial support and poor organization ("Jamaica was all about waiting for busses that didn't come," said one of the Peace Child team.)

Over seven days, the seven-person group gave seven performances to about five thousand young people. The performances were at the National Gallery of Art, the Prime Minister's Residence, and International 4-H Club Celebration, and three high schools. The pulsating gospel rhythms of "I BELIEVE" and the high falsetto wails of "MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX" made the Peace Child group known and recognized throughout Kingston. "We definitely made our presence felt in Jamaica," said Lucia, "We were forever being recognized and asked to perform in airports, cafeterias, on beaches. At our final performance, the audience began to whoop their applause as soon as we were announced. They certainly got the message."

The group stayed in a convent with some German and Nigerian entertainers: both groups were anxious to have the Peace Child troupe visit their countries, and many people were anxious to know more about "PEACE CHILD" and how it could be brought to their countries. Many addresses were exchanged and inter-cultural bonds established.

Summing up, Lucia feels, "Our participation in the Festival was especially important because we presented a message of friendship and co-operation between children of the USA and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union—indeed all socialist nations—were conspicuous by their absence from the Festival despite its theme of "participation, development and peace." They had been deliberately excluded, and it was upsetting to see anti-communist slogans daubed on the walls in Kingston.

"Originally, this had made us hesitant: our message is about all children joining together to lead the world to peace. We made the decision to go because we felt that this message needed to be there; to be shared, - to be sung out joyfully, just as it will be sung at the World Youth Festival in Moscow later this summer. It is my hope and dream that "PEACE CHILD" will be heard and sung in ALL nations, in ALL languages, - that we will assist in breaking down, not maintaining the barriers that divide us, so that together we can create a world that resolves its differences by co-operative, peaceful means without the threat of nuclear violence.

"To this end, I believe JAMFEST 85 was a good initial step for us into the broad international arena."

Both were propaganda exercises, but both would bring Peace Child to the world's stage and, in the case of the USSR, fulfil the goal which – since our inception in 1981, we had dreamed of doing.

However, we had no intention of parroting their politics – just making an appeal for Peace. And they seemed ready to accommodate us – and even planned a tour for us to different stadia around Moscow, and to Artek in the Crimea. We rehearsed the Americans at a Field Centre across the street from the US President's retreat at Camp David – an appropriate location, we thought, as it was close to where Jimmy Carter had agreed the Camp David accords. We then did a performance for DC Audiences at St Mark's church on Capitol Hill – a Video of which still exists. See Here: [\(link to video 3\)](#)



When we got to Moscow, we incorporated the Russian children into the show. Steve Riffkin and the Russian Band learned the songs – and introduced some new ones, particularly "Mwi Zhelayem Schastyia Vam" (We wish you happiness) – which the cast sang and recorded for Stas's Festival Album – along with I have a Vision and Mr President with the Leningrad Philharmonic! We ended up performing the

show in front of legendary Russian poets, Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky at the famous Natalia Sats Children's Theatre. Natalia welcomed us personally – and, when Gorbachev had his big Glasnost Assembly with Yoko Ono, Norman Mailer and the rest, she invited me to come as her guest as a pioneer of Children's Theatre. This was an astonishing privilege from the lady to whom Prokofiev dedicated his masterpiece, *Peter and the Wolf*.



Rosey Woollcombe, Natalia Sats and David Woollcombe – with a picture of Lenin in the Background

As I wrote in the newsletter: “The most thrilling part for me was that it was all so normal. Though, in many ways, children and musicians from the USA and the USSR walking out on stage together was as unlikely as children walking on the moon together, when it came down to it – they all learned their lines, rehearsed their moves, sang their parts and had a great time together on and off the stage.”

The Russians audiences LOVED Peace Child and its songs – nowhere more surprisingly than at the Olympic Stadium when Sasha and Gwen performed the lyrical “*I have a Vision*” at the end of a punk rock concert by the German band, the Scorpions. I watched the punk rock audience rocking out to every Scorpions’ song and feared that they would boo Gwen and Sasha off the stage. I couldn’t have been more wrong: they listened, spell-bound, tears in their eyes as the heavily pregnant Gwen sang her heart out – with Sasha supporting her with his powerful baritone. The whole audience stood as one at the end and cheered for fully ten minutes.

“I felt excited and honoured,” said Gwen Ross – whose nerves and morning sickness evaporated as waves of love and admiration flooded over her from the wildly appreciative young audience.



It was while we were in Artek that we heard the dreadful news that Samantha Smith and her father had been killed in an air crash. Samantha was a figurehead for Peace Child: she had written to Chairman Andropov, asking him why he was planning to blow her, and all her friends, off the face of the planet. Andropov replied, and took the precaution of copying his reply into ABC, NBC, CBS and all other media channels in the USA. There was a collective harrumph from the US establishment – which the Soviets gleefully exploited by inviting Samantha to the USSR and showing her a great time with other Soviet children in Moscow, St Petersburg and Artek. When she died so tragically, of course, the Soviets wanted to do a ‘Telemost’ – which is what the Russians had been doing to bring together women’s groups, business people and other sectors of society. This paved the way for the Landmark [Peace Child / PBS Space Bridge](#) of December 2nd 1985.

Royal Albert Hall Peace Day Concert – October 1985:

As though we didn’t have enough to do, we + the wonderful organising Team from the Ockendon Venture(below), took on the management of the UN Year of Peace Launch Event in the Albert Hall.



Eirwen Harbottle, David Gordon, Oliver Hall, Roger Daniel, Rosey Simonds & Diana Haydon



Calvin Samuel and Faruza Balk – star of Wizard of Oz

United Nations Peace Day Festival Royal Albert Hall, London, September 17th 1985



1 - Bob Geldof, founder 'Live Aid'; 2 - Fairuza Balk & Calvin Samuel in "Peace Child"; 3 - Sir Shridath Ramphal; 4 - Heritage Ballet; 5 - Environmentalist David Bellamy; 6 - Ralph McTell; 7 - Children's Chorus; 8 - Kodo; 9 - Top of the Bill, Chris de Burgh.

This was the biggest, most star-laden event that the Peace Child team has ever attempted anywhere in the world. A 560-voice children's chorus was gathered from all over England, including representatives of 40 national embassies, to sing "Peace Child" songs; star of Walt Disney's "Return to Oz," Fairuza Balk, was engaged to play Katya in an extract from "Peace Child"; singing stars, Ralph McTell and Chris de Burgh; the BBC's environmental protection spokesman, David Bellamy; founder of Live Aid, Bob Geldof; Commonwealth Secretary General, Sir Shridath Ramphal; two live Dance Companies, and the extraordinary Kodo Drum Group from Japan—all came together to launch a new concept for the word 'Peace' as Britain

moves toward the UN Year of Peace in 1986—a concept of 'Peace' in its broadest, widest sense; "Peace that is sourced in the energy of human love and compassion," said the late Joyce Pearce, "an energy far stronger than the nuclear energy we fear so greatly." Joyce, founder and director of the Ockendon Venture, conceived the original vision for the Festival, though tragically she died in July before she could see it fulfilled.

But fulfilled it was! The Albert Hall was packed to capacity, and the audience was moved and enthused by the varied show, seamlessly put together by producers David Woolcombe and David Gordon, ably assisted by a small but dedicated team of volunteers from the Peace Child Charitable Trust,

the Center for International Peace-Building, the Ockendon Venture and the UN University of Peace. But amid all the power and pyrotechnics of Kodo and the pop stars, perhaps the most powerful moment was when a handful of the youngest children from the chorus, some in their national costumes, sat with Jerry Jampolsky and Diane Cirincione (co-directors of Children as Teachers of Peace), and shared their ideas about the priorities required for a peaceful world. Their tiny figures in the heart of that huge arena, watched intently and at times applauded by the vast audience, represented the essence of Peace Child—children of different nations speaking straight from the heart about their hopes and yearnings for peace.

It was an extraordinary event – as the report above shows. The Kodo Drummers from Japan were electrifying, and Sonny Ramphal, S-G of the Commonwealth gave the speech of the evening, winning applause for practically every line he spoke. Sadly, the video made of the event appears to have vanished – but we have [the programme](#). It paved the way for the even bigger challenges of the Moscow-Minneapolis Space Bridge and the breakthrough US-Soviet Tour coming up the following year. All three helped Peace Child win the UN's prestigious Peace Messenger award the following year.

Soviet-American Space Bridge, December 1985:

With Natasha now 9-months old, we took the decision to return to the USA where we had been invited to do a production in beautiful Santa Barbara at the Lobero Theatre. Steve Rifkin, who had earned his spurs doing both the San Francisco show and the 1985 Soviet Festival show, agreed to MD.

Before that, there was the small matter of the US-Soviet Space Bridge – for which we had signed a contract to do between WCCO-Minneapolis and Gosteleradio in Moscow. The deal had been brokered by the wonderful David Speer, of Padilla & Speer – Minneapolis's premier PR Agency. Dear David, now sadly departed, shouldered the entire financial burden of producing the show and bringing to it the best PR and news coverage Peace Child had ever had. We did it at the famous Minneapolis Children's Theatre linking to a studio in Moscow – and, under the skilful management of Kim Spencer and Evelyn Messenger, the link up was flawless – especially the moment when a Soviet and American child, linked on a blue-screen image, reached out, touched hands – and sang "Reach Out for a Star!"



David & John Denver discuss the Script



Vlad Posner & Pavel do sound checks in Moscow



John Denver talks to the Press afterwards

But the most remarkable thing about it was the presence of John Denver. The American cast members had rehearsed at a farm some 100 miles north of the city. And – when it came to drive back the night before the show, it was snowing heavily. We worried that we were not going to make it back on the Freeway – and that our entire cast would freeze to death in a snow-drift! Much worse – how on earth was John Denver going to fly in from Aspen – with the Airports all closed to commercial traffic? Sure enough, in the morning, we had a message from Denver’s office saying that there were problems landing in Minneapolis – but that, as it was a crystal-clear morning, he was still hoping to fly in. And fly in he did – arriving on stage at the Children’s Theatre about 3-minutes before the link was due to go live. No time for rehearsal – Nothing. Just go for it – and, supreme professional that he was, he was word perfect – and wonderful. And, at the end, he sat amongst the American kids and chatted about his beliefs on camera. It was a deeply moving moment.

On Christmas Day 1985, the Space Bridge was broadcast nationwide on the PBS network – garnering an audience of millions. It didn’t raise the millions of dollars that we’d hoped – but everyone said that we were bad about asking for the funds. It was true – we were always lousy fund-raisers. But we kept working – and surviving, and affording the endless trips to Moscow.

Moscow-Minneapolis Children’s Space Bridge – [Short-Form Video](#)

Lobero, Santa Barbara – 1986:



Christmas 1985 – with our new baby girl, and our eyrie up in Painted Cave on the hill above Santa Barbara, was gorgeous. The photographs show the staggeringly beautiful position, looking down over green hills to the Pacific. It was a magical place to be – but hard work to cast and produce in such a laid back town. We did so with considerable assistance from local troubadour, Chic Streetman. Chic’s wonderful *Peace in the Heart* song – a canon in 7 languages, became a staple of the *Peace Child* shows for ever after. It is a superb collective experience singing for peace in different languages all at the same time.



Chic Streetman



Steve Riffkin came down from San Francisco to direct the music, and two new friends from the Space Bridge, Barbara and Howard Katz, flew in for the show. [Lobero Programme](#). As ever, Rosey, produced the show, balancing Natasha on her hip as she made phone calls from a wall phone in the Kitchen in Painted Cave. The person from whom we'd rented the house in Painted Cave came back just after we'd done the show and – as we hadn't got anywhere else to go – we moved into a temporary home, first in the Trout Hatchery, then in Goleta close to where Alexander was going to school.



The Lobero Finale

Meanwhile, I was commuting back and forth to Moscow as we now had the possibility of a US-Soviet Tour to bring the first soviet youth and rock band to the USA on a Youth Cultural Exchange to do Peace Child. Laurie Tucker had issued the invitation on the Space Bridge and, though the Soviets had cut the invitation from their broadcast – the fact that the show was repeated 7 times on Soviet Television, showed the Soviet authorities just what a fine propaganda tool they had in Peace Child.

Still – the bureaucratic constraints to allowing Soviet children to tour a 'decadent western musical' to the USA remained formidable. It took the combined energies and creativity of Stas, myself, Vlad Posner and many others to figure out how we could do it. The key was to find a sponsor who was not part of the government. The International Trade Center was independent and set up to promote global trade – for which peace was a necessary pre-condition. So, if they wanted to promote a Soviet-American peace musical to boost trade, there was, in theory, nothing the government or communist party could do to stop them. Also – in the era of glasnost and perestroika which was convulsing the arthritic Soviet bureaucracy – something like the Peace Child exchange programme was the flavour of the month – supported at the highest levels. Even so – as you will read – it was touch and go up to the last moment.

As well as trying to produce the show in Santa Barbara, navigate the resistant authorities in Moscow, raise funds for the tour and keep our young family together, I was also working to jolly along the 12 x tour hosts in the USA and Canada whom we needed to host our performances. A HUGE job for them, and us. We hired a tour manager, Michael Lindeman, who scored an early success by raising \$100,000 from Steve Wozniak – co-founder of Apple Computers. He helped enormously – but the faith of the hundreds of American men and women who supported the tour – which I was not at all sure it would ever happen – was extraordinary!! We were used to being blessed with Miracles in Peace Child – but in planning the 1986 summer tour, I felt we were stretching the powers of the Almighty perhaps a step too far!

OUR FINEST HOUR – Summer 1986:

The whole story of the 1986 breakthrough tour, written up from my diaries of the whole experience + the funding proposal, the press reports, some of the thousands of photographs that were taken during it, can be found [here](#). More photographs can be found [here](#). The experience of the tour was distilled in this [13-minute documentary](#) which was shown, endlessly, throughout the USA and Soviet Union to drum up support for the subsequent tours – about 100 of which were organised between 1987 and 1994. Most of them used a variant of the [Tour Script](#) written for the 1986 tour – improved and adapted for the different provinces in Russia which our tours visited.



The Archive and the Video will give you a sense of the joy and sense of achievement we all drew from the Tour – and what follows is just a brief impression of the story that convulsed our lives for ever after. It was the FIRST Soviet-American youth musical; it was the FIRST time a Soviet rock group had toured the USA. It was the FIRST US-Soviet reciprocal Youth Exchange – an effort that every one from the Scouts to the American Field Service had been trying to pull off for years; and it did set up the Peace Child Foundation as the world's premiere youth / cultural exchange body dedicated to furthering people-to-people ties with the USSR. But most of all, we wanted to bring down the Iron Curtain which had disfigured relations between East and West for far too long. And faced with the joy and smiles of children – that ridiculous Iron Curtain melted away!

July 1986 found me in Moscow waiting for the US Cast to arrive and suffering from the frustrations of not being able to phone or e-mail any one in the USA. Even fax was challenging! And there were almost no computers in Moscow! So – everything was being typed up on my Mac Classic or portable typewriter! We had found a Russian cast, and the Americans were set to join them on the Friday night to co-create a show!

The Soviet Ministry of Culture had gotten in on the act – not in itself a bad thing as they could, if they wished, smooth several of the government obstacles that would stand in our way. But – it rather gave the lie to our show being a 'cultural promotion for the Trade Centre!' The Minister of Culture was supposed to see the show on the Thursday – giving us only five and a half days to write and rehearse, the entire 2-hour musical. And in Russian!! With only one Russian-speaking American in the Cast!

But then North-west Airlines let us down – with not one but TWO broken planes, meaning the US kids did not get to Moscow until late on the Sunday night, dog-tired having had to take a bus from London to Cardiff to get a flight to Moscow at all, having missed their connection in London. That gave us just 3 and a half days to prepare the musical.

We had the rough plan for the show – but it needed a lot of fleshing out. And we had two directors – myself and Vladimir Alenikov, and a choreographer, Vlad Druzinin, who was not good under pressure. And pressure did not come much greater than getting a 2-act musical up and running in 3 days!

But the kids refused to see the problem: they got up bright as buttons on the Monday morning, and dived right in to a read-through, vocal warm-ups, and improvisations of the scenes that needed re-writing. Supported by an amazing team of Steve Riffkin, Tony Booker, and Stas himself, they pulled together all but one scene of the show, mostly in Russian, ready for 14.00 Thursday.

Spot on time, the Soviet Minister of Culture turned up. He was a bullet-headed man, with a deeply-tanned bald head and leathery expression. He looked as though the last thing he wanted to be doing was watching a children’s musical. But – a job’s a job – and he sat patiently waiting for the show to begin. And, as it played out, his face melted. When it was over, there were tears in his eyes as he came on stage and hugged and congratulated the kids. It was only later that we learned that he had an autistic child whom he’d cared for most of his life as a single parent: his love for children was the greatest gift of his life. A gift for us too, as he approved the tour – allowing us to travel to Ulyanovsk and Artek.

The tour itself is a blur in my memory: little snippets stand out. First – we all realised that we needed a better choreographer than the one we had – so we called up Mike Malone, the excellent choreographer of the original Kennedy Center show. And we got him a visa and a flight, but he couldn’t join us until Artek. So – he had to get a train from Moscow to Simferopol, and then a taxi to a bus-stop in Yalta – where I was supposed to meet him. And – being an African-American in the USSR was not a comfortable experience – and the lack of mobile phones or any way of reaching him easily was a nightmare. So when I came to the bus stop in a taxi at the appointed hour and found Mike, cowering in a door way, waiting for me – I was more relieved than I’d ever been that whole tour. So was he!



Mike Malone, Tony Booker and members of the Cast in Yalta, Crimea

Mike transformed the show – disciplining the whole cast, and tightening up the music and the dialogue. By the time we did our final show in Moscow, it was not half bad – and, heading out to the USA, we felt buoyant and confident we had a good show. The business of getting exit visas from the USSR, transit

visas through the UK, and entry visas to the USA was a complete nightmare – and we didn't know until the last minute who would get them. (*Stas and Ludmilla did; Alenikov and Druzinin didn't – crazy unfair! But that's the USSR*) All that – and booking 21 flights for each person around the USA was a logistical horror story – but, somehow, we did it. And we got on the plane, travelled to London, had a great night out in London climbing on the lions in Trafalgar Square and arrived in York Pennsylvania, all set to conquer America.



York PA was a perfect place to start a tour. The Russians loved it – a small town on the edge of the Amish country with lovely people like Bill Schintz, the local photographer to welcome them. An abiding memory is of the Russians and Americans dancing wildly to “YMCA!” – and the po-faced Russian Ministry man doing the ‘Funky Chicken’ with a fluffy chicken on his head. Slava, one of the young Russian cast members was asked on a TV interview in California which his favourite city had been on the tour: “York,” he said. “Oh, you mean New York...” said the interviewer. “No – York Pennsylvania. That was the best city...” As the slogan says: “America starts in Pennsylvania” – and nowhere was that more true than our own, and the Russians’ experience in York. It is seared on our memories as a happy, happy place.

We had three days to re-write and rehearse the show in English – but that was easier as most of the Russians spoke pretty decent English. And Mike was working in his mother tongue – so he rose to the occasion brilliantly, tightening up the choreography – making numbers like Fireball and Reach Out sensational. And the Russian music was delightful – the Siberian folk songs sung by Sasha Malinin, and Eta Musica sung by the lovely story-teller, Ludmila Senchina, affirmed the beauty of the Russian Culture. We have a recording of the [whole show from the Wilton Theatre, Los Angeles](#). It is introduced by US talk show host, Casey Kasem, Stas and myself and, though just a single camera shoot – you will get a sense of the vibrancy of the music, and the passion of the young performers. They knew they were making history and it shows in their commitment.

It also reflects a golden moment, not just in Peace Child's, but also in World History. This was the first “Soviet-American youth / cultural exchange” since the Russian Revolution of 1917. For most of us, that phrase would conjure up a vision of an earnest seminar of young academics, or jolly games at a New England Summer camp, or po-faced musicians playing classical music. The US State Department would have preferred us to do any of those things: Staff were told NOT to attend our final show in Washington DC – as we had dared to prey on their territory and talk about nuclear disarmament. We did talk about that because both the Russians and American youth WANTED to talk about that: this was their show – and they had a great time together doing it, singing and dancing their hearts out in a story that showed their commitment to a future of peace and co-operation. What's sad is to reflect that now – nearly 40 years on – we are no closer to the peace we created on stage between Russian and American youth. The need for peace and co-operation is possibly even more necessary than it was then back.

Which is why the work of Peace Child is never done! (See our new 2024 [Peace Child](#) story here.)