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PERIODICALS

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Nicole Zuraitis Wins Grammy



Lithuanian-American Nicole Zuraitis won a Grammy for the Best Jazz Vocal Album of the Year at the 66th Annual Grammy Awards, which took place in Los Angeles, California, on February 4, 2024. "How Love Begins" is Nicole's sixth album and features her original music.

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Raising Pigeons in Lithuania

This pigeon enthusiast presently has no less than 50 pigeons housed in Palanga, the noted Baltic sea resort. He also maintains a unique museum of pigeon memorabilia.



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A Conversation with the writer Jonas Ohman, co-founder of the Ukrainian Aid Organization Blue/Yellow

Divine Mercy Choir from Vilnius to tour the US

The choir will perform concerts in some of the most beautiful American churches starting in mid-Lent of 2024 through April 7, Divine Mercy Sunday.

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WHY UKRAINE CANNOT LOSE THE WAR WITH RUSSIA

In Conversation with the writer **Jonas Ohman**, co-founder of the Ukrainian Aid Organization Blue/Yellow

Part 1.

LAIMA VINCĖ

Jonas Ohman was born in 1965 in Umea, northern Sweden. As was mandatory for young Swedes during the Cold War, he served in the Swedish military, receiving training as a paratrooper. After his service, he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Languages from Uppsala University. An interest in Lithuania's independence movement against the Soviet Union brought him to Vilnius, Lithuania, in the early 1990s. He has made Lithuania his home since and has been granted honorary citizenship by the president. Jonas Ohman is a documentary filmmaker known for co-directing the film *The Invisible Front* and other documentaries on historical topics pertinent to the Baltic States. He is also a writer, journalist, translator, and language teacher, fluent in Lithuanian, Russian, Ukrainian, German, English, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish and fairly proficient in a few other languages.

In 2014, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, together with Lithuanian partners, he set up the NGO Blue/Yellow to support Ukraine's Armed Forces. Blue/Yellow has provided support of crucial importance to Ukraine's defense efforts throughout the war since 2014. Jonas has been awarded over 20 times for his actions in Ukraine by armed forces units, ministries, and the presidents of Ukraine and Lithuania. He is the only foreigner awarded the medal for "The defense of Avdiivka."

Jonas and I spoke about his memoir, *Donbaso džiasas (Donbas Jazz, Alma Littera, 2021)*, which he wrote in Lithuanian, his fourth language. His memoir documents the life-changing events that led to the creation of Blue/Yellow. In this book, he describes the intricacies of delivering non-lethal aid to the front lines in Eastern Ukraine, something that he and his team have done personally for 10 years already, placing their lives on the line with every trip.

Laima Vincė: Since 2014, Blue/Yellow has provided humanitarian supplies to the front lines in Eastern Ukraine. After I read *Donbas Jazz*, I realized how challenging it is to deliver that aid and that your team risks their lives with every delivery. Can you tell me more about the risks involved and what makes Blue/Yellow's approach different from other organizations, such as the Red Cross?

Jonas Ohman: I would like to rephrase that. We are providing non-lethal military aid. At this point, since the open hostility of Russia began, our focus is on 95 percent deliveries of non-lethal military assistance. It is important to make this distinction. Organizations like the Red Cross focus on humanitarian needs, medicine, refugees, etc. We do some tactical medicine, but essentially, we are enhancing the Ukrainian Armed Forces' ability to defend themselves, protect themselves, and get back at the enemy. From one perspective, I would describe us as a paramilitary organization, although we are not formally that. Another thing that makes us unique from a European and U.S. perspective is that we provide aid directly to the front line, as a rule, to the units and the individuals using the equipment. Sometimes, we use trusted partners, but they do the same thing: they provide aid straight to the units on the front line.

You have built up trust with those units.

We need to be fast. We need to be accurate. And we want to be trustworthy. That means we mainly work at the battalion and sometimes brigade level. So, we have almost nothing to do with Kyiv, the general staff, and the Ministry of Defense. That is one of the reasons why we are so appreciated because, at some points, we are way faster than the support coming from the West. While their sup-



Blue/Yellow delivers drones to the Ukrainian armed forces. Jonas Ohman is in the center.

port may be of higher quality and, of course, they are providing weapons, we strive to provide needed items within days, sometimes within hours of receiving a request.

How do international laws on non-lethal aid deliveries affect your work?

It's a gray zone. It depends on many factors. For one thing, laws change, regulations change. For example, at one time, you had to register all the drones you were bringing into Ukraine. Now, in Ukraine, they have lifted those restrictions, and all you have to do is inform them that you are bringing drones. However, one of our biggest problems is not Ukraine-related; it is Poland.

Let's talk about Poland.

Poland definitely has a vested security interest, and they are pro-Ukraine and anti-Russian. But Poland has a few other issues. One is that they really like control. They are highly control-minded. They want to know what's happening, what's going on. Everyone must have a piece of the control cake. If you bring any so-called dual-use equipment – such as thermal drones – formally speaking, you have to register that with the Poles to take it over Polish territory. It can take weeks, if not months, to secure a delivery if done formally. It's a big issue. They're not fast. Poles are formalists. They want to do things according to their rules and regulations, sometimes leading to deep frustration. Poles, at times, have indeed confiscated cargo – not ours, but cargo from other organizations.

In your memoir, you talk about how you had some contacts at the border with Ukraine who let you through quick-

ly. Is that still the case, or was that only back in 2014?

Yes and no. Contacts help; they really do. I would probably say that the Polish side all depends on the border guard. Some border guards are very pro-Ukrainian. We have a "don't ask - don't tell" agreement with them. You can tell there are different understandings and willingness. The hardest part, however, is to leave Ukraine. That is related to a fear of people taking out contraband, guns, and those things. There was a situation when someone brought explosives through the border, and the explosives blew up at the border crossing.

There was that scandal about a year ago when you commented to the American media that Blue/Yellow gets supplies much faster to the front lines, which led to some misunderstandings that the Republicans in the United States capitalized on politically.

That was a stupid situation because I got that question two months into the war, and I saw serious issues with logistics at that point. Lots of equipment provided was supposed to go to the front line but went to units in western Ukraine instead. Some things showed up in the wrong place. Some things were put in warehouses for reasons that we do not understand. There were lots of issues. At that point, two months into the war, I gave my assessment. I think that I was quite right on that one. A couple of months later, when those documentaries were shown, the situation had already changed. Maybe 60 or 70% of the equipment got through at that point. Of course, I learned the hard way how difficult it is with the media. Again, the film was not about that at all. My comment was a random comment made while we were driving in a car.

That comment got a lot of traction in the media.

I have a Twitter account but barely use it. When that happened, I went to my Twitter and looked at how Trump supporters were using my argument against Ukraine. Here, I, who made the comment, entered into the debate and wrote, "This is not the case anymore. The situation has improved. My comment was taken out of context, and so on." Nobody was interested in what I had to say. The guy who said it was inconsequential. I saw how the bandwagon of politics works. They grab an argument out of context and capitalize on it. Truth has nothing to do with it.

That brings me to this new Speaker of the House, Michael Johnson, who is aggressively trying to cut aid to Ukraine or group it with other foreign aid. If the Republicans were to cut aid to Ukraine, is Blue/Yellow prepared to take up the slack?

Yes, we are to some extent. The problem with that is that they're talking about lethal



Russian propaganda recruitment billboard from the Donbas region.

equipment, weapons, ammunition. We cannot fill that gap. This is a very tricky question. It has indications beyond the aid itself. It's about the West getting tired of supporting Ukraine. The biggest problem I see here is that the West is unclear about what it wants to achieve. They have no bigger plan, no vision. There is nothing about where this will take us. We're talking about European Union membership, we're talking about NATO, we're talking about future borders. Obviously, there is the Russian future to consider as well. How are we supposed to deal with that? There are other implications. China is looming in the background. This discussion is not happening, at least in the open. Now they're only talking about money, about numbers, about resources. I've been to Washington, DC, five times in the last 18 months. Whenever I meet with congressmen, senators, decision-makers, their staffers, and lobbyists, I always ask, "So, what is your end game? What do you want to achieve? Where is this taking us?" I never get a solid answer. It also surprises me how little decision-makers often know, keeping in mind that Ukraine is one of the main issues on the agenda and will be for a long time.

I was in Vilnius during the NATO Summit this summer and carefully followed the news. Of course, many Lithuanians and Ukrainians were deeply disappointed that NATO membership was not extended to Ukraine. But then there were other voices that argued that Ukraine is not ready for NATO membership because so much sensitive information about NATO could get into Russian hands if it is infiltrated by Russian intelligence.

That's a valid argument. Ukraine is not ready, not by far. Personally, I did not expect any membership promises. What I probably would have liked to hear is a membership plan. Meaning that we intend to integrate Ukraine into NATO within the next ten or 15 years. That would have been a more viable and realistic goal, but that didn't happen either. Basically, we had the same statement, "We will continue to support, blah blah blah." That really worries me. Ukraine is slowly, shall we say, getting into the Afghanistan mode, where U.S. support flowed for 20 years without a clue. On a daily basis, about 380 million U.S. dollars flowed into the Afghanistan project, and they had no idea what to do with it.

I like to compare the U.S. now with the U.S. we saw in World War II. The situation is somewhat similar: isolation. Then, at the beginning of the war, the most crucial moment was the lend-lease to Britain, the destroyers, and everything else. When provoked in December 1941, the U.S. joined the war; they understood they had to participate in the European theater, the Pacific theater, and so on. The military-industrial effort during World War II was amazing. I'm reading this again with new eyes, so to speak. The amazing effort at that time in all possible fields by the U.S., technologies, personnel, logistics, you name it, was impressive. And on top of that, they had a very clear idea of the postwar period, both in Europe and in Asia. Creating Japan as a strategic partner was brilliant, then the Marshall Plan. What can I say? They saw that. I understand the expression "the Great Generation" better now. With all this hesitation, unwillingness to engage and get deeper into things, and reluctance to finish the job and lay out a vision, my conclusion is that we are in a deep, almost paradigmatic, leadership crisis in the West.

I was in Lithuania when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and of course, we were watching the buildup of Russian troops surrounding Ukraine. I only know what I glean from the media and through reading and observing, but maybe my average person's observation sheds light on something, so I'd like to share with you that my first thought was NATO should get in there and bomb the supply lines and the troops surrounding Ukraine.

You go back to history, and you see lots of things that, in the light of what's happening or not happening today, really give an explanation. We must understand that the American understanding of Russia/Soviet Union was and, to some extent, still is based on a Cold War perception. That is, of course, that we won the Cold War, and we then helped Russia. We tried to make friends with Russia, and it didn't happen. For me, Georgia in 2008 was the alarm bell that this was not going well. But when you talk to decision-makers, they think differently. I spoke to people in D.C. about this. There is an old-school Cold



Jonas Ohman (center) on the front lines with Lithuanian and American flags unfurled.



Russian dog tags – the spoils of war.

War theory called the balance of power, where you have a couple of security actors and opponents. At the same time, while they are opposing each other and have different goals, they keep a balance between themselves. They keep things in equilibrium. This mindset of the balance of power regarding Russia is, unfortunately, still very valid in the U.S.

It reminds me of how George Orwell describes the geopolitical balance of power in his novel, 1984.

Yes, you have Eurasia and so on. Enemies may change over time. There is a definite Orwellian touch to it. Post-Cold War security thinking still operates with Cold War logic. That's still valid. You ask: Why aren't we doing more? I can give one example. I was somewhat involved in the handover of the Abrams tanks from the perspective that I had the opportunity to meet Senator Bob Menendez. I had the honor of strongly recommending to him that providing tanks to Ukraine was a good strategy. However, they provided only 32 Abrams. In terms of the military, it's roughly a battalion of tanks. As a gesture, it's nice, fantastic, thank you very much. In terms of local tactical performance, yes, it makes a difference, but at the operational level, 32 tanks are almost insignificant. The same thing goes for the Leopard tanks. At this point, the U.S. has thousands of Bradley fighting vehicles. They're old, and they're not going to use them anymore. So far, they have provided 200 Bradleys to Ukraine. That's two brigades' worth of vehicles. It's not going to give you operational significance. It's not going to help to make a difference. The list of examples goes on. Why are we not doing more? It was expressed clearly: we're providing Ukraine enough to defend themselves but not enough to win. And why is that? I can tell you. After my discussions in D.C. and elsewhere, I talked with a gov-

ernment official in Brussels. He asked me, "Do you know, Jonas, what we fear most?" "No, I don't know," I answered. "We fear that Ukraine would win this war," he responded.

Really?

Yes, and then the explanation came. He said that while, of course, it will be bad if Ukraine loses—morally, technically, economically—it would be a far worse scenario if Russia lost.

Why?

It's, again, back to the balance of power: They're afraid that Russia, as a major player, would spin out of control.

As if they're not already out of control.

Policymakers are far more afraid of a Russia without Putin than a Russia with Putin.

So, the Prigozhin episode was frightening to them.

Yes, that was stressful for them. They are afraid of Russia spinning out of control if they lose this high-stakes event, which for them is the war in Ukraine. For us in the West, the war in Ukraine is a nuisance, but in Ukraine – and to some extent in, for instance, the Baltics – it is existential. But here is the thing: in Russia, the war with Ukraine is existential as well.

Why?

It's about the beginnings of Russia. There's the argument that Ukraine is all Russia. Ukrainians are really Russians. It's a challenge against the roots of the Russian identity. If they lose Ukraine, they lose the cradle of the Russian identity. Then they've got Moscow, which historically speaking is much shallower culturally. Russia needs Ukraine for its identity. Russians need Ukrainians desperately for their identity, but they are failing miserably at that. And so, they raise the stakes. So, the war is existential for Russia as well.

From another perspective, isn't this war also about Eastern Ukraine's oil and gas reserves?

Yes. Oil and gas reserves are part of it, but we all know that one of the biggest issues with Ukraine is that it has been a transit state to Europe. The main idea of the Nord Stream pipeline was to circumvent Ukraine, to get out of this dependence on Ukraine.

I think Angela Merkel did a lot of damage with her pipelines and attempts on the world political stage to integrate Russia.

Merkel was such a disaster in this situation. I had one instance of her direct interference in one of the things I was doing.

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Liaudanskas' pigeons enjoy the fresh air of Palanga.

to exhibit the items. My ultimate goal is to establish a permanent pigeon memorabilia gallery in Palanga. I am proud and happy to represent Palanga and the Lithuanian seaside in various international pigeon exhibitions in France, Denmark, and Poland.

Do you breed pigeons for sale as well?

I am not into pigeon breeding. But, yes, I exchange some of my pigeons with other pigeon keepers in order to renew my flock. The best racing pigeons can be quite expensive, with some selling for up to 500 euros. I have heard rumors of a mail pigeon being sold at auction in China for nearly one million euros, but this information would need to be fact-checked. The most expensive sport pigeon ever sold in Belgium fetched its owner 1.25 million euros.

With most veterinarians treating feline and canine creatures, is it easy to find a good vet for an ailing pigeon?

Indeed, most vets treat only dogs and cats. Fortunately, I was able to locate a skilled local vet who assisted in nursing my sick pigeon back to health several years ago.

I believe that a good pigeon fancier tends to be a good person as well.

It's true! I've noticed that all the other pigeon keepers I talk to are pleasant, humble, and honest people. I hope that's how others see me!

Are pigeons moody?

That is a good question... If the pigeon is healthy, it is always agile and spry. However, if the bird's health deteriorates, it tends to move away, stay in the corner of the shed, and lose its appetite. Generally, male pigeons are more active, and some can even be aggressive, especially when a new male pigeon arrives on the scene.

Do your pigeons have names?

No, they do not. When you have 50 of them, remembering all the names would be a challenge.

You often attend pigeon exhibitions located at quite a distance. How do your pigeons manage the trips?

Despite the efforts to make the long trips as comfortable as possible, they can still be tiring for the pigeons. When I attend pigeon exhibitions located far away, I usually place up to 12 of them in separate two-deck box-like suitcases. The pigeons must be vaccinated before attending any competition, which is a requirement by the organizers.

Once we arrive at the exhibition, the organizers provide care for the pigeons for a fee. Pigeon owners must pay for the fodder and the exhibition cage.

I usually travel with other pigeon fanciers when I attend international pigeon exhibitions abroad. We meet in a city such as Kaunas, where we obtain a trailer with a regulated temperature for the transportation of the pigeons. Customs are usually kind to us and don't ask many questions about the feathered cargo. However, during the exhibition, the organizers and judges are meticulous about the documentation regarding each pigeon. The slightest discrepancy can ruin the pigeon's chances of winning. In a recent competition, the winning pigeon garnered 96 out of 100 possible points; mine got 95 points. What the judges missed evaluating my pigeon's exterior – its color, feathers, beam, eyes, claws, and stance, I will probably never know.

What are the pigeon's main nemeses in the sky and on land?

When pigeons are flying, their main enemies are hawks. On land, they have to watch out for cats and martens. With fewer birds in the Palanga forests, more hawks are coming to the town center to hunt for prey. I've heard from my peers in Klaipėda that even the local seagulls are becoming increasingly hostile and attacking pigeons.

Who will take over your pigeons someday?

Unfortunately, I don't have a clue. My son is more interested in technical stuff than in pigeons. As most pigeon fanciers are of a mature age, every time I see an advertisement for an entire pigeon collection going on sale, I assume that the pigeon keeper has fallen ill. I hope some young people discover the joys of raising pigeons, but only time will tell.

Jonas Ohman

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Does U.S. aid to Ukraine help if the backroom intention is not to support a Ukrainian victory against Russia?

We should not underestimate the aid. At the beginning of the war, the Javelins, NLAW anti-tank weapons, etc., were crucial for Kyiv's defenses. I don't know what would have happened had they not done that. U.S. aid at that time strongly enhanced Ukraine's ability to survive as a state. Now we see there is another dimension to why we are slowly increasing the pressure. We are providing missiles; we're talking about F16s. We're raising the stakes as well. I call the strategy of the West the "python strategy." Python meaning, we cannot get out of this. Ukraine can't lose because that would be bad. Russia can't lose either. So, the strategy is to increase the pressure and slowly try to strangle Russia. That's one of the reasons why it takes so long. The logical thing would be to give all the weapons at once, but that is not the U.S. and Western strategy. So, this is how these smug policymakers think: "Let's increase the pressure slowly, month by month, weapons system by weapons system, and at some point, Russia will back off, and we can re-set this situation."

Do you think Russia will back off, knowing the Russian mentality?

They can't back off. We must understand that Russia is neither willing nor able to get out of this. There is too much at stake, too much sacrifice already, too much bad will, too many problems. They cannot back out of this. Putin or not. They need a victory just as much as we do, but for other reasons.

Many in America feel that this war is Putin's war and that he does not have the support of the Russian people. Having spent time in the region, how much support from Russians do you think Putin has?

I can give an example of how Russian support works. Russians have been brainwashed for decades, and especially in the last 10 to 15 years, by the Putin regime. They are told that Russia is above everything. They are told that, as Russians, they have special rights and a superior culture, language, and history. They are told that the post-Soviet territories—including the Baltic States—actually belong to them. They are just temporarily not in their control. This narrative goes on and on. I must give credit to Putin for this old/new Russian narrative based upon factors taken from Tsarist Russia, from the Soviet Union, and going further back. When you engage with Russians in this kind of discussion, you see that it is a belief system. It's a religious paradigm, a quasi-religious belief. That's one level.

On another level, there is the unwritten Russian social contract between the Kremlin and the rest of Russia. I can give you one example. I had a conversation with Russians who described the situation in Russia as follows: "Imagine a Russian village some-

where. Nothing happens. People drink, they beat their wives, you know, everything is very Russian. Then someone gets called up and is sent to Ukraine and he dies. So, this is what happens next. The widow, the wife that was being beaten by this now deceased soldier, gets a payout of say \$20,000. The amount varies. Now, this money makes this lady the richest person in the village by far. She can buy a dress, she can throw a party, she can do whatever. The next morning after the party everybody looks around and thinks, 'Who else can we send?'"

The unwritten contract between the central power, the Kremlin, is basically coffins for payouts. The Russian population, being as it is with little or no education, accepts this paradigm. We have several cases of prisoners of war taken by Ukrainians who couldn't read. They were illiterate. So, that's one social contract.

The other social contract is between the two major centers of power and culture in Russia, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. They are left alone, and the residents are not called up for mobilization. That's because these people are the elites. These are the people who support the Kremlin. Moscow at large is very much in favor of the Kremlin or knows better than to protest because they fear the consequences more.

But doesn't anyone in Russia have any sense of empathy for the Ukrainians?

No, now we go back to the brainwashing. Every day they are told Ukrainians are Nazis, that they are horrible. They're told that Western support is used to pour gasoline on the flames. The narrative is systematically provided by many different channels, and there is no way to argue against it. It is like during Soviet times—if you kept within these specific frameworks, you'd be fine, and nothing would happen to you. It's a primitive but subtle system at the same time. To some extent, Russians are hostage to Putin, but at the same time, right now, the whole Russian system is primed for this kind of situation. It's very Orwellian.

And for these reasons, there's little dissent among Russians against the war?

Yes. If Russia is Orwell, then the West is Huxley. The West is about distraction and pleasure, so it has its own issues. I can give you one example. We're now talking about the German brigade that is supposed to be stationed in Lithuania. One of the main arguments I hear is how we should build kindergartens and restaurants to make Lithuania attractive to the soldiers. I mean, really? If things weren't so serious, it would be absurd and funny.

You have to entice them to come with trinkets and goodies.

This is our problem with people in the West. Europe was a peace project after World War II. The peace project was—unfortunately, in a way, one could argue today—very successful. The mindset in Sweden or Germany is that war will never happen here again. It's over. Bad things happen somewhere else. Bad things can happen in Afghanistan or somewhere else, but not here. Ergo, we don't have to prepare for it. We're done with brutality. But guess what? The bad guys recover, and they resurface, and here we are.