"NOT EXACTLY CRAZY, SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL"

I first met Israel Moiseevich Gelfand in Moscow State University in the winter of 1990–91 when V.I.Arnold asked me to pass a letter to Gelfand during his seminar.
Gelfand kept asking me who I was for what seemed to me like half an hour, he couldn't hear what I was saying to him. Fifteen minutes later he couldn't understand what was said by the speaker at the seminar, not until everything was said in a clear, simple manner, so that the first grade student would be able to understand.

The seminar, which was supposed to be a double feature with Kontsevich, explaining his proof of Witten's conjecture, and Vassiliev,
explaining his construction of knot invariants, all within a couple of hours, fell short of its goal.
Indeed, Vitya Vassiliev got stopped at the definition of a knot,
while Maxim Kontsevich barely covered the combinatorial model of the
Deligne–Mumford space
by the cells defined using
the Strebel differentials.

Needless to say, the magic of the surrealistic show instantly won me over.

One of the outcomes of that particular seminar was that Gelfand practically ordered Boris Feigin and Sasha Beilinson, who were present, to give a series of

lectures, one on the models of statistical physics, and another on the moduli spaces and the definition of conformal field theory. I used every excuse to sneak away from the Moscow Physical–Technical Institute where I studied to attend these lectures of Feigin and Beilinson.

  I don't think I had an opportunity to attend any more Gelfand seminars in Moscow after that.

My next encounter with Gelfand was already at Rutgers, in 2002. This time I was invited to speak at his seminar and got my own share of the Rabinovich and Abramovich stories explaining what would be the point for a mathematician to attend a physics lecture (if I remember correctly, the idea was to run after a taxicab as opposed to run after a bus, to save more money). I remember Gelfand being extremely encouraging in public yet rather demanding in private.

My last encounter with Gelfand was in Boston in 2003 during his 90–th anniversary celebration conference.
He gave a remarkable lecture on the mathematics and music. Part of the lecture he had to stand facing the microphone which was oddly positioned. This could push off balance any speaker in Gelfand's place but he handled the situation with his usual confidence and humor. Among other things he mentioned that both mathematics and music, the good ones, share the same four features:

beauty, simplicity, exactness, and crazy ideas.

In my work I feel Israel Gelfand's influence,
either explicit, or implicit one. I wish I could combine
all four of his criteria. For the time being
most of what I do can probably account
for two.

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