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FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM: JAZZ AND THE COLD WAR

Cole H. Powers

PSU Challenge U.S. Geopolitical Policy in the Modern Era

Dr. Karen Hoppes

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During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States was embroiled in two fights for freedom. On one front, the country fought a cold war for the victory of American democracy over the tyranny of communism and on the other, American citizens engaged in a civil rights movement, seeking freedom for black Americans, and for black people and nations across the globe. When the United States government decided to send American jazz musicians abroad as part of a Cold War propaganda effort, these two battles collided. In the resulting intersection of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement unfolded a story of hypocrisy, irony, and contradiction.

The story of the jazz tours began with President Eisenhower and his outspoken conviction that only a American Cold War victory would preserve freedom. In 1953, Eisenhower announced that “The forces of freedom and the forces of tyranny are met in the struggle in which the battlefields are indeed the minds and souls of men.”¹ In his mission to win the “minds and souls of men,” he created the United States Information Agency (USIA), a propaganda agency which used a variety of mediums to spread information about United States aims and values around the world. Then, in 1954, Congress authorized the creation of the Cultural Presentations Program (CPP), which administered world tours of countless musical and performing artists. It was only a matter of time before jazz, a music which was seen by its performers and its audiences as powerfully symbolic of freedom, became a significant part of the CPP’s activities.

USIA officials expressed adamant agreement with Eisenhower’s claim that the Cold War was a fight against tyranny. The view that America was fighting for freedom and peace was expressed again and again by the agency’s director, Theodore Streibert. In 1956, Streibert wrote in a circular airgram,

¹ Dwight B. Eisenhower, *Congratulations letter from President Eisenhower on 1st anniversary of the USIA*. July 28, 1954, found at: <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/people-people-program>.

The kind of future world the United States seeks to bring about is one of peace and progress, of security and freedom for all mankind, achieved by joint effort and common agreement, a world in which the liberty, the dignity and the well-being of the individual, and not his enslavement and regimentation, are the true concern of governments.²

Streibert went on to say that the USIA should express “confidence that the ‘wave of the future’ will be the solid, substantial progress of free people, making their decisions freely, and not the Communist program of material change systematically brought about by force, terror and spiritual regimentation of human beings on a vast, unprecedented scale.”³ Streibert held a strong belief not just in the value of freedom, but in the idea that the United States was representative of freedom. That America sought “freedom for all mankind,” and that that goal would be reached when Americanism achieved victory over communism’s “force, terror and spiritual regimentation” was the dominant view among USIA officials.

Eisenhower feared that the world did not see things in the same light. He claimed that the United States suffered from an image problem, with other nations skeptical that a victory of American capitalism would bring about freedom, dignity, and peace. He worried that other nations instead saw America as a failed result of capitalism, “a race of materialists” whose “successes are described in terms of automobiles and not in terms of worthwhile culture of any kind.”⁴ He also understood that the Civil Rights Movement, which was gathering speed and legitimacy, would harm the image of the United States as the country claimed it was fighting for freedom abroad. Out of the conviction that America was fighting for freedom and the fear that other nations failed to see this arose the principal objective of the USIA: to “submit evidence to

² *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1955–1957*, Foreign Economic Policy; Foreign Information Program, Volume IX, (April 11, 1956), Document 197, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v09/d197>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.

peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the U.S. are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress, and peace.”⁵

Thus, before the CPP even considered adopting jazz, its activities were designed to correct what Eisenhower saw as “the image problem.” First, it operated “in a special effort to gain the respect of foreign intellectuals (artists, writers, educators, persons in the professions) for American leadership, and to gain their active allegiance to the principles of the Free World.”⁶ The USIA hoped that exporting displays of a rich American culture would resolve Eisenhower’s fears that Americans were seen as materialists. A 1955 paper prepared by the National Security Council celebrated the effectiveness of the program to this end when it proudly cited a *New York Times* correspondent who wrote, “Yugoslavs responded to *Porgy and Bess*, as one governmental official put it, ‘with the observation that only a psychologically mature people could have placed this on the stage.’”⁷ In addition to showing the world that the United States had culture of value, the cultural programs were designed to convince foreign audiences that America supported freedom, especially racial freedom, despite evidence to the contrary. One report claimed, “It is significant to note that several of the groups and some of the individual artists were of the Negro

⁵ United States Information Agency, *Mission of the United States Information Agency, 1954*, found at: <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/people-people-program>.

⁶ *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1955–1957*, Foreign Economic Policy; Foreign Information Program, Volume IX, (Washington, March 2, 1955), Document 185, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v09/d185>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

race. The cultural attainments of these Negroes were living proof to foreign audiences of the great progress achieved by the race under the American democratic system.”⁸

Given this function of cultural exchange, jazz was the perfect weapon of choice. Unlike classical music, jazz was an art form and cultural achievement that America could claim as uniquely American. Furthermore, jazz, an African American music which not only featured black bandleaders and stars but was also powerfully symbolic of freedom, could be used to convince the world that America had moved past its era of racism and segregation.

Jazz first entered the picture with Willis Conover’s radio show which was aired on Voice of America (VOA) radio, the United States funded international radio program. Most VOA broadcasts lacked effectiveness because of their overtly propagandistic nature. In 1957, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wrote to USIA director Lewis Arthur Larson, “The selection of news sometimes seems to be made on the basis of scoring a minor propaganda point rather than with the purpose in mind of providing news as defined by the president. Some commentaries, moreover, give an impression of being written to belabor a propaganda issue.”⁹ But while the clearly propagandistic nature of most programs provoked resentment among listeners, Conover’s show was avidly listened to by around 30 million people in 80 countries by 1955.¹⁰

⁸ *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1955–1957, Foreign Economic Policy; Foreign Information Program, Volume IX, (Washington, August 31, 1955), Document 190, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v09/d190>.*

⁹ *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1955–1957, Foreign Economic Policy; Foreign Information Program, Volume IX, (Washington, June 27, 1957), Document 204, found at: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v09/pg_590.*

¹⁰ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14.

It was not just music that reached these 30 million listeners. Conover instead saw his show as powerful propaganda. In his eyes, jazz was perfect symbolism for policymakers' claims that America meant freedom. He explained,

The musicians agree on tempo, key and chord structure but beyond this everyone is free to express himself. This is jazz. And this is America. That's what gives this music validity. It's a musical reflection of the way things happen in America. We're not apt to recognize this over here, but people in other countries can feel this element of freedom. They love jazz because they love freedom.¹¹

Conover's vision of jazz as symbolic of American freedom was widely shared by the American public and government alike.

It was ultimately Harlem Democratic congressman, and civil rights activist, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. who brought jazz to the attention of the State Department. Powell, who was married to jazz singer, pianist, and organist Hazel Scott, served as an advocate in government for both civil rights and for jazz. Seeing the symbolic power of jazz in the Cold War context, Powell suggested that the State Department incorporate the music into its cultural programs, and in 1955, a *New York Times* article reported, "The State Department had advised him [Powell] yesterday that it would go along with his proposal to send fewer ballets and symphonies abroad, and put more emphasis on what he called real Americana."¹² The article, consistent with the public's and the USIA's vision of jazz, declared in its headline, "Remote Lands to Hear Old Democracy Boogie."

The first jazz musician to tour under the CPP was trumpeter and bandleader John "Dizzy" Gillespie. Given the State Department's objectives, Gillespie was a surprising choice. He was extremely critical of racism in the U.S; in response to the request that he attend State Department

¹¹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹² "Remote Lands to Hear Old Democracy Boogie," *New York Times*, CV:35,727 (November 18, 1955), 15.

briefings on how to best represent the United States abroad, Dizzy responded, “I’ve got three hundred years of briefing. I know what they’ve done to us and I’m not going to make any excuses.”¹³ Nor was Gillespie vehemently anti-communist, having carried a communist party card so that he could perform gigs at party events.

Even so, Gillespie’s tour of the Middle East was an enormous success for the State Department. As John P. Callahan reported in the *New York Times*, the band “surpassed government propagandists’ hopes.”¹⁴ Gillespie received a positive reception at nearly every venue, but his performances in Greece were particularly indicative of success. He entered the country during intense anti-American protests over the United States’ support of Greece’s suppressive, right-wing dictatorship. Gillespie recounted that by the end of the show, “they loved us so much that when we finished playing they tossed their jackets into the air and carried me on their shoulders through the streets of the city.”¹⁵

The events in Greece revealed a reality of the Cold War and of jazz diplomacy which differed dramatically from officials’ idealistic statements about freedom and America. United States actions were not always in the interest of freedom abroad. During the Cold War, the United States repeatedly violated the freedom of other peoples as it did when it supported Greece’s dictatorship, and then sent jazz, the ultimate symbol of American freedom, to make the case that it was still on the right side of the fight. The State Department originally saw jazz as an opportunity to convince audiences that the United States supported freedom despite civil rights

¹³ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34.

¹⁴ John P. Callahan, “Jazz, Surgery Aid U.S. in Pakistan,” *New York Times*, CV:35,869 (April 8, 1956), 31.

¹⁵ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 34.

abuses at home. Gillespie's tour proved that it was also effective in countering similar criticism over abuses of freedom abroad.

Of course, that did not mean that civil rights abuses were not an important part of Gillespie's story. America's words and actions again contradicted each other when Gillespie returned home and found that his race prevented him from enjoying the American freedom that he was sent abroad to advertise. As David M. Carletta wrote, "[the United States'] 'cultural-intellectual establishment' considered jazz 'the unwanted stepchild of the arts.' Jazz was broadcast over the airwaves of Voice of America and heard around the world on State Department-sponsored tours, but jazz musicians did not receive foundation grants, visiting professors, or Pulitzer prizes."¹⁶ The reaction that Gillespie received when he returned to the United States conformed to this trend. Many conservative Americans were quick to denounce his music as primitive and black, claiming that it was incomparable to what they considered to be the high art form of European classical music. Senator Allen J. Ellender claimed, "To send such jazz as Mr. Gillespie, I can assure you that instead of doing good it will do harm and the people will really believe we are barbarians."¹⁷ Led by Representative John Rooney, congressmen who agreed with Ellender focused their attacks on the high costs of jazz tours. In 1957, Rooney's subcommittee succeeded in cutting funding substantially after arguing that the salaries of musicians and artists "are exorbitant and indicate a reckless disregard for and an irresponsible handling of the taxpayers' money" and citing the weekly fee of \$2,100 paid to Gillespie.¹⁸

¹⁶ David M. Carletta, "Those White Guys Are Working For Me': Dizzy Gillespie, Jazz, and the Cultural Politics of the Cold War During the Eisenhower Administration," *International Social Science Review*, 82:3/4 (2007), 125.

¹⁷ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 40.

¹⁸ John D. Morris, "USIA Funds Cut 26% as President is Balked on Fee," *New York Times*, CVI:36,239 (April 13, 1957), 1.

Gaining support for funding propaganda efforts had been a challenge since the USIA's conception. But when jazz tours began, racist attitudes towards the music combined with the fact that government support of the arts was a new idea in the United States to make funding an even bigger issue.

Gillespie responded to congressional attacks in an *Esquire* article titled "Jazz is Too Good for Americans." He described the enthusiastic respect his band received from foreign audiences, saying that the "lionizing of American jazzmen overseas has had a great effect on our morale." He lamented the fact that while he was met by respect and admiration abroad, his music "has never really been accepted as an art form by the people of my own country." He pleaded that the United States government move to mend this problem, proposing that jazz be "taught to school children at all levels of their education."¹⁹ Gillespie, civil rights activist and carrier of a communist card, saw the State Department tours as an opportunity to reach for a more genuine freedom than that which meant no more than American victory over communism. Even the title of his article separated jazz and the freedom it represented from America. Instead, Gillespie sought freedom from the racial oppression which prevented his music from being recognized by American audiences, government, and institutions.

The State Department responded to criticism over Gillespie's trip by sending a white musician on the next tour. Clarinetist and bandleader Benny Goodman shared Gillespie's concern that jazz was not treated as a legitimate artform in the U.S, but unlike Gillespie, Goodman did not recognize the role that race played in the issue. Goodman claimed that jazz transcended race, that "neither a difference of race, creed, or color has ever been of the slightest importance among the best of the jazz bands." While Goodman's intentions in saying this were

¹⁹ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 42-43.

good, he failed to understand that it was his white skin and stylistic conservatism that helped resolve the complaints over Gillespie's tour.

Goodman was well received on his 1956 tour in Southeast Asia, at one point attending long jam sessions with the King of Thailand. A *New York Times* article reported on his success saying, "Benny Goodman and his band are credited with having 'done more for Thai-United States relations than any other American mission to Thailand in recent times.'"²⁰ The State Department's goals for the mission were to improve relations with the Thai elite, not the citizenry. The American public seemed to share this vision. The article cited above noted when performing for public masses, "Mr. Goodman's sophisticated music often went over the heads of audiences."²¹ The vision of mass audiences as unsophisticated and of elite audiences as the true target of diplomacy was a trend throughout the Cold War. While the United States' rhetoric celebrated freedom, policy was focused away from the "unsophisticated masses" and towards the elite. The same irony that arose when the United States used jazz to quell protest abroad can be seen in the State Department's choice of target audiences.

The racial tensions surrounding the tours were inflamed in 1957 when Eisenhower refused to enforce court ordered desegregation of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. The jazz world responded vehemently to Eisenhower's decision, with Louis Armstrong refusing to attend previously planned tours for the State Department. It was only after Eisenhower agreed to send troops to Little Rock to enforce desegregation that Armstrong indicated that he might reconsider playing the role of musical diplomat.²²

²⁰ "Benny Goodman Sways Thailand: Band's Visit Is Credited with Doing More for U.S. Ties Than Any Recent Mission," *New York Times*, CVI:36,128 (December 23, 1956), 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² "Musician Backs Move: Armstrong Lauds Eisenhower for Little Rock Action," *New York Times*, CVII:36,405 (September 26, 1957), 12.

After the Little Rock crisis, the State Department focused on sponsoring tours of black musicians who played music other than jazz. The most notable of these musicians was opera singer Marion Anderson, who gained incredible popularity on her tour to Asia in 1957. Anderson acknowledged, but minimized, the implications of Little Rock when speaking to foreign audiences. One article quoted her saying that when the topic came up, “We felt very grieved about it. We didn’t go into any long discussion. This was neither the time nor the place for it.”²³ The United States was quick to capitalize on her success, creating a film about her tours that amounted to little more than anti-Soviet propaganda. Artists like Anderson allowed the United States to counteract increasing international awareness of racial segregation while avoiding the stigma associated with jazz by American conservatives.

When the State Department returned to using jazz musicians in international diplomacy, their selection was at first confined to white musicians. One such tour was Dave Brubeck’s 1958 trip to Poland and the Middle East. Brubeck’s tour was plagued by logistical issues and a lack of planning. Brubeck recalled at one point being asked to hide in the trunk of a car because the State Department had booked flights in such a way that they were forced to travel through checkpoints without the necessary visas. Near the end of the tour, the State Department extended Brubeck’s trip suddenly and without warning to include engagements in Iran and Iraq. He performed in Iran under partial sponsorship from the Iranian Oil Refinery Company and attended his final engagements in a tumultuous Iraq while ill from dysentery and ordered by a doctor not to travel. Only weeks after Brubeck left Iraq, General ‘Abd al-Karim Qassim overthrew the Iraqi government, threatening United States oil interests. As with Gillespie’s tour to Greece and

²³ J.P. Shanley, “Singing Diplomat: Ms. Anderson’s Singing Tour on Television,” *New York Times*, CVII:36,499 (December 29, 1957), 63.

Goodman's in Thailand, Brubeck's performances were designed to advance United States interests, not freedom.

Despite its chaotic nature, Brubeck's trip was both a diplomatic and personal success. Upon returning home, Brubeck wrote about the tour in the *New York Times*. In his statement, he commented on the ability of jazz to transcend boundaries between different cultures and races, writing,

Jazz is colorblind. When a German or a Pole or an Iraqi or an Indian sees American white men and colored in perfect creative accord, when he finds out that they travel together, eat together, live together, and think pretty much alike, socially and musically, a lot of the bad taste of Little Rock is apt to be washed from his mouth.²⁴

While similar comments from Goodman had come from a place of ignorance, Brubeck understood the role that race played in jazz and the barriers that still existed to integration. Rather than proclaiming that race was not a concern, Brubeck's statement acknowledged that race was a concern and that jazz was a powerful tool for mending the damage and forming bridges between disparate races and cultures. The power of jazz as a way of fostering peace and inter-cultural conversation was demonstrated poignantly in Brubeck's recollection of a moment when "A Polish government worker said to me backstage, 'Why don't the artists rule the world?' There were tears in his eyes and he almost made me weep."²⁵ He also spoke about jazz as a symbol of freedom, claiming that jazz was seen as representative of freedom not just in America but around the world. He cited the words of a man he met in Poland who said, "Your very presence indicates that we have more freedom now than we did two years ago."²⁶ Brubeck's

²⁴ Dave Brubeck, "The Beat Heard 'Round the World: Jazz, says a well-known music man, is an American export with an international appeal, making friends wherever it goes.," *New York Times*, CVII:36,667 (June 15, 1958), 233.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

tour was used to reach the oil-hungry aims of United States foreign policy, but it was also successful in living up to Brubeck's lofty ideals of cultural exchange, achieving genuine freedom by fostering peace, understanding, and respect between different peoples.

In 1960, Louis Armstrong was sent to tour Africa, a trip that had significant racial implications. Armstrong had viewed a previous private tour to the continent in 1956 as a homecoming, saying, "After all, my descendants came from here – and I still have African blood in me."²⁷ He made a similar statement during the State Department tour.²⁸ Armstrong's sense of Africa as a home was amplified by the almost frenzied positive response he received there. His attitude towards race during trip, however, differed from his more militant response to the events in Little Rock. When asked about race, he stated, "I don't know anything about it; I'm just a trumpet player" ... "The reason I don't bother with politics is the words is so big that by the time they break them down to my size the joke is over."²⁹ While on the surface, Armstrong appeared to back away from the race question and belittle himself in the process, his remarks may have been more pointed than they appear. As was evidenced in his reaction to the Little Rock crisis, Armstrong clearly did "bother with politics," and his characterization of politics as a "joke" may have been a subtle expression of his frustration that the crucial issue of segregation was rarely

²⁷ "100,000 In Africa Cheer 'Satchmo': Gold Coast Makes a Holiday of Concert—Gillespie Is Back After Jazz Tour Gillespie Tour Loses \$92,000," *New York Times*, CV:35,915 (May24, 1956), 27.

²⁸ Gilbert Millstein, "Africa Harks to Satch's Horn: Louis Armstrong and trumpet, speaking a language clearly understood, have done better there recently than a good many statesmen.," *New York Times*, CX:37,556 (November 20, 1960), 342.

²⁹ Leonard Ingalls, "Armstrong Horn Wins Nairobi, Too: Kenyans Say 'We Dig You, Satch' in Praise of Jazz Band's African Tour," *New York Times*, CX:37,543 (November 7, 1960), 5.

addressed by politicians. This subtle approach may have allowed Armstrong to advocate his more genuine vision of freedom without displeasing the State Department.³⁰

The tour had powerful racial implications, not only for Armstrong, but for all of Africa. One *New York Times* article highlighted, “a Congo official hailed Mr. Armstrong as ‘Ambassador Extraordinary of the United States,’ expressing pride that this ‘son of our African race’ had attained world fame.”³¹ Another article quoted a Nairobi English-language newspaper which read, “Satchmo has given expression to the often inarticulate feelings of his people, once oppressed, but now, although there are blots on the record, moving rapidly towards full and equal citizenship of the great country he represents.”³² Armstrong’s Africa tour clearly revealed the paradox of jazz diplomacy. On the one hand, the tour served America as a Cold War weapon, convincing other nations that black Americans were “moving rapidly towards full and equal citizenship” and “attaining world fame.” On the other hand, it served the global black population, the “African race,” as a weapon against racial oppression by giving “expression to the often inarticulate feelings of his people.” The article which quoted the Congolese paper concluded that, “the sophistication of Mr. Armstrong’s music appeared to be lost on most of his Congolese listeners.”³³ Similar to statements made regarding the masses on Goodman’s trip as unsophisticated, this statement is reflective of the American public’s belief that the African public was primitive and unsophisticated. It is this perception that caused America to treat new

³⁰ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71.

³¹ Paul Hofmann, “Satchmo Plays for Congo's Cats: Trumpeter Arrives on Red Throne and Crew of Bearers,” *New York Times*, CX:37,534 (October 29, 1960), 8.

³² Leonard Ingalls, “Armstrong Horn Wins Nairobi, Too: Kenyans Say 'We Dig You, Satch' in Praise of Jazz Band's African Tour,” *New York Times*, CX:37,543 (November 7, 1960), 5.

³³ Paul Hofmann, “Satchmo Plays for Congo's Cats: Trumpeter Arrives on Red Throne and Crew of Bearers,” *New York Times*, CX:37,534 (October 29, 1960), 8.

African nations as Cold War battlegrounds, not sovereign states, and made way for the troubling motives behind Armstrong's tour.

Like Gillespie's engagement in Greece and Brubeck's in Iraq, Armstrong's visit to Africa took place against a tumultuous political backdrop. The Congo, led by the socialist Patrice Émery Lumumba, declared independence from Belgium in 1960. Belgium, set on maintaining control of the mineral rich Katanga province, organized for Katanga to secede from the newly independent nation under the anti-communist leadership of Moïse Tshombe. Lumumba sought help from the United Nations and then from the Soviet Union to reunite the country. The United States had an interest in maintaining its own access to minerals and uranium reserves in Katanga, and in preventing the Soviet Union from accessing these same reserves. Eisenhower and officials in his administration also distrusted Lumumba's nationalist qualities and believed that, because he was a black leader, he was especially susceptible to Soviet control.³⁴ In conformity with the Cold War trend which saw the United States treating newly decolonized nations as illegitimate and undeserving of sovereignty, the United States detained and then assassinated the new prime minister of the Congo. Armstrong was sent into this crisis as a distraction and as proof that America was still on the side of freedom. Nowhere in the story of jazz diplomacy was irony as heavily present as when Armstrong's music -- a music which spoke for the sovereignty of African nations -- was used towards the United States' aims of engineering African states. Armstrong used his tour to fight for freedom. USIA officials used the same performances to convince other nations that the United States was doing the same.

³⁴ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 66.

In the early 1960s, Dave and Iola Brubeck collaborated with Armstrong on the jazz musical entitled *The Real Ambassadors*.³⁵ The musical aimed to tell a story of the jazz tours which included all the complexities of race and politics. The song “Cultural Exchange” announces, “Say that our prestige needs a tonic, / Export the Philharmonic!” pointing out that the United States government’s goals for cultural exchange were not to foster cultural understanding as Brubeck hoped, but to improve the international image of the United States. Another song, “The Real Ambassador,” commented on the irony that became so apparent in Armstrong’s tour, saying, “Though I represent the government / The government don't represent / Some policies I'm for!” In writing the play, the Brubecks intended much of the content to be light-hearted and satirical. But Armstrong, who acted the main role of the Ambassador, turned lines like, “Could Thou [God] perchance a zebra be?” into gut-wrenching commentary on American racism and segregation. Despite insisting that he avoided politics, the trumpeter clearly considered fighting for black freedom to be an important part of his role as a diplomat.

In 1961, the USIA began debate over a reevaluation and restructuring of the cultural and informational exchange programs. Statements made throughout the conversation revealed that while some disagreement existed, those within the USIA still agreed with Eisenhower’s vision that the cultural program was propaganda for the purpose of improving the country’s image. In the words of Donald M. Wilson “All these programs exist only to further the achievement of United States foreign policy objectives.”³⁶ On March 3, 1961, Under Secretary of State Chester

³⁵ Dave Brubeck and Iola Brubeck, *The Real Ambassadors*, with Louis Armstrong, Carmen McRae, Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks, Annie Ross, Trummy Young, Joe Darensbourg, Billy Kyle, Eugene Wright, Irving Manning, Joe Morello, Danny Barcelona, Columbia Masterworks, LP, 1962.

³⁶ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Subjects. Cultural and social activities: General, 1961: January-August, 1, found at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/296/JFKNSF-296-004>.

Bowls wrote in a memorandum of the “crying need to improve public understanding of the US abroad,” saying, “It seems to me we must review quickly the question of how we wish to portray ourselves, our society, our policies, and the motivations behind our major programs and consider how to correct many existing impressions abroad of American life and purpose.”³⁷ USIA officials continued to view correcting the image issue as an important aspect of the cultural program’s role as propaganda, and so the United States continued to use jazz to convince the world that it supported freedom, even in times when it clearly did not.

Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States grew in the early 1960s, with President Kennedy ramping up anti-Soviet rhetoric and the Soviet Union rejecting cultural exchange programs on the basis that they were little more than propaganda. A memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, written in 1961, stated that “Soviet efforts in the cultural exchange field have little in common with Western ideas of free intellectual interchange. They primarily represent an effort to facilitate Soviet foreign policy objectives, while attempting to shield soviet society from ‘alien’ influences.”³⁸ Part of this shielding consisted of the frequent jamming of the VOA program by the Soviets. A paper from the USIA says that each time the United States accused Russia of radio jamming, “they counter-challenge by accusing the United States of broadcasting ‘evil propaganda broadcasts.’”³⁹ The paper goes on to explain that this

³⁷ *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXV, Organization Of Foreign Policy; Information Policy; United Nations; Scientific Matters*, (Washington, March 3, 1961), Document 119, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v25/d119>.

³⁸ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Meetings and Memoranda. National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 13, re: Exchange of Persons Behind the Iron Curtain. JFKNSF-328-014. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 17, found at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/328/JFKNSF-328-014>.

³⁹ *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXV, Organization Of Foreign Policy; Information Policy; United Nations; Scientific Matters*, (Washington, undated), Document 122, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v25/d122>.

disagreement partly stemmed from the fact that foreign audiences, Soviets included, made no distinction between VOA and the more overtly propagandistic Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

Even so, jazz had quickly grown more popular among the Soviet public over the past decade. In a 1953 *New York Times* article, Edith Evans Asbury wrote that “there is a deep hunger among the Russian people for American jazz,” and described how American songs “continue to be sung by Russian people, who manage to hear and learn them from foreign broadcasts and from records made from those broadcasts or smuggled into the country.”⁴⁰ In 1956, Welles Hangen had written a second article in the *New York Times* which read, “The Soviet Union’s great debate over jazz is over. Mass audiences in front of radios and at variety theaters are eagerly applauding syncopated tunes that were once anathema to this country.”⁴¹ As the American public watched jazz enter the Soviet Union, they embraced Conover’s narrative that jazz was symbolic of uniquely American freedom.

The State Department decided to capitalize on Soviet youth’s appreciation of jazz by sending tours into the Soviet Union. Benny Goodman was chosen for the first of these trips. The choice made sense for several reasons. Goodman himself had long awaited a chance to play in the Soviet Union.⁴² In fact, doing so had practically become an obsession of his. But it was ultimately Goodman’s conservative style and white skin which once again led him to be chosen over others. The State Department guessed that these attributes made him more akin to the world

⁴⁰ Edith Evans Asbury, “Jazz Bootlegged All Over Russia: Moscow Correspondent’s Wife Tells of Her Ideological Song-Writing Troubles,” *New York Times*, CIII:34,971 (October 23, 1953), 10.

⁴¹ Welles Hangen, “Soviet Finds Jazz Is Acceptable Art: One-Time Outcast Genre Gets Nod in Article Calling for Original Work in Field,” *New York Times*, CV:35,778 (January 8, 1956), 109.

⁴² “Goodman Thinks Russians Dig Jazz: Underground Jam Sessions Believed to Be Held — He Would Tour if Asked,” *New York Times*, CVIII:36,891 (January 25, 1959), 6.

of classical music than more modern, black musicians, and thus less likely to offend Soviet officials. As one *New York Times* article said, “United States officials had the impression that the ministry believed that Mr. Goodman was less objectionable than musicians who played more modern or progressive jazz.”⁴³ Many black musicians were frustrated with the State Department’s choice. Gillespie argued that Goodman’s jazz was a relic from the past and that he was chosen simply because he was white.

Goodman’s conservatism led to considerable conflict during his tour. He had chosen a set of relatively modern and forward-thinking musicians to play in his band and grew frustrated when these musicians did not conform to his outdated style. His harsh and perfectionistic methods of bandleading only exacerbated these tensions. His music received disapproval from the audience as well. Contrary to the State Department’s assumptions, “most of the younger Soviet jazz experts seemed to feel that it is old-fashioned and has little to offer their orchestras in the way of style.”⁴⁴ This attitude was, however, not completely pervasive. After “Goodman had complained that local authorities had been handing out tickets to the Communist party and other organizations, making it difficult for young jazz fans to get in,” a concert was given to an audience of young fans who had been allowed to freely purchase tickets.⁴⁵ These young fans “applauded wildly,” and forced the band to do “forty minutes of encores.” The choice of a conservative musician was also somewhat effective in curbing disapproval of the Soviet government. The *New York Times* reported that “Soviet culture officials gave their blessing today

⁴³ “Soviet Blessing Goes to Goodman: Official Approval by Ministry of Culture Given Jazz Group,” *New York Times*, CXI:38,116 (June 3, 1962), 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “Leningrad Hails Benny Goodman: Orchestra Wildly Applauded in Biggest Success of Tour,” *New York Times*, CXI:38,134 (June 21, 1962), 25.

to the music of the Benny Goodman orchestra.” ... “Some of the official barriers came down Monday when Premier Khrushchev unexpectedly attended the first concert.”⁴⁶ While Khrushchev’s recognition of Goodman’s orchestra was a significant step forward in United States diplomacy, the Soviets were not totally sold on jazz. Another article reported that the orchestra’s activities “were curtailed tonight by Soviet authorities.” It explained that the band “was told that it could not use Terence Cathermann, American Embassy deputy cultural attaché, as its interpreter,” and “was also prevented from distributing Benny Goodman buttons to Soviet fans.”⁴⁷ As the Soviets moved to constrict the activities of jazz bands and set up barriers between them and the public, America’s perception of jazz as symbolic of the west and of freedom was only amplified.

The late 1960s brought about a return to state sponsorship of black jazz musicians. Among these musicians was Duke Ellington. Not long before his tour, the United States had supported coups by the Ba’athist party against the pro-communist government in both Syria and Iraq. Ellington’s trip targeted both countries. The band came into close contact with the conflict when they experienced a citywide lockdown after the presidential palace in Baghdad was attacked by the Iraqi air force. Although the city returned to normal the next day, Iraqi forces performed a successful coup against the Ba’athist government only three days after Ellington left. Like Brubeck and Armstrong, Ellington was thrown into the battlefield of the Cold War in order to push the narrative that the United States still supported freedom after it violated the sovereignty of the Syrian government.

⁴⁶ “Soviet Blessing Goes to Goodman: Official Approval by Ministry of Culture Given Jazz Group,” *New York Times*, CXI:38,116 (June 3, 1962), 13.

⁴⁷ “Soviet Police Curb Goodman Jazz Band,” *New York Times*, CXI:38,118 (June 5, 1962), 38.

Throughout the tour, Ellington spoke strongly against racism and elitism. When he and his band were shipped between cities in a cargo plane, Ellington was furious, calling the plane a “cattle-car for negros.”⁴⁸ He demanded better accommodations and said that a white orchestra would not have received such barbaric treatment. When asked about race while abroad, Ellington “condemned racial segregation in the United States” and blamed racism for many of the country’s short fallings.⁴⁹ Ellington also complained that many of his audiences were composed entirely of neocolonial elites. He argued that this defeated his own purpose of reaching new masses with his music. But he often balanced this criticism with praise, thanking American freedom of speech for his ability to criticize the country while on a state sponsored tour. Ellington viewed the issue with a critical eye, but shared faith with USIA officials that America, at least in its idyllic form, meant freedom.

Ellington’s tour ended abruptly with the assassination of President Kennedy. A trumpeter in the band, Herbie Jones, recalled the event. He said that upon hearing that the president was shot, he thought, “yeah, well, okay. Everyone’s always getting shot around here. The guy says, ‘Our president.’ And you hear about a dozen plates fall on the table.”⁵⁰ The reaction was indicative of the double standard in which the United States saw its own sovereignty and power as sacred and indestructible while treating other governments as disposable and impermanent. It was in part this double standard which allowed the United States to take clear actions against freedom using jazz to claim that it was fighting for the cause.

⁴⁸ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 129.

⁴⁹ “Ellington Against Segregation,” *New York Times*, CXIII:38,637 (November 6, 1963), 25.

⁵⁰ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 143.

The lack of news coverage of Ellington's tour is significant. Benny Goodman's tour to the Soviet Union had received substantial and extensive coverage from the *New York Times*, which featured Goodman in bold headlines, large photographs, and long, analytical articles. Only a year later, articles on Duke Ellington's tour were confined to the smallest corner of the page, their content never extending beyond a brief report of the facts. Only one such article mentioned the coup which Ellington's band experienced, a comparatively big event to anything that occurred on Goodman's tour.⁵¹ The public saw jazz as a symbol of the triumph of American freedom over communism, and Goodman's tour aligned perfectly with this narrative. Ellington's tour did not, and so received far less attention from the press.

Sending jazz musicians into the heart of conflict appears at first to be an absurd strategy for fighting a war. But understanding how tightly both the American public and the USIA clung to the narrative of American freedom makes the logic behind the tours clear. Americans equated America with freedom, and the USIA pointed to the country's culture as a perfect display of this freedom. As a 1964 memorandum written within the USIA read,

Drawing upon its native inheritance and the wealth of intellectual, artistic, philosophic, and religious traditions brought by immigrants, the U.S. has created its own variegated, dynamic, serious culture. Its hallmark is freedom: there are no more barriers to expression in art than there are in speech; there is no cultural party line imposed from the top ... Culture in the United States is not reserved for a privileged few nor confined to the capital cities; it spans the breadth of the people and the land. The United States believes in the freedom to create, not only in the United States but for the people everywhere, and the free flow of culture among nations.⁵²

⁵¹ "Baghdad Was Swinging, Says Ellington of Coup," *New York Times*, CXIII:38,647 (November 16, 1963), 9.

⁵² *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1917–1972, Volume VII, Public Diplomacy, 1964–1968*, (Washington, April 6, 1964) Document 12, found at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1917-72PubDipv07/d12>.

In the eyes of the USIA there was no better way to demonstrate that America supported freedom than to export its culture. No aspect of the country's culture symbolized American freedom as powerfully as jazz, and so the United States sent jazz bands abroad to clear up what it saw as misconceptions that America was not on the right side of the fight. To USIA officials and to many other Americans, the jazz tours were no more than affirmations of the truth. But the reality was that America's actions, at home and abroad, were not always steps towards a freer world. Thus, the actual function of the jazz tours was different than that which was perceived by most Americans. They served to quiet anger over United States actions, to convince the world that the United States was fighting for freedom despite frequent violations of the sovereignty of other nations and of the civil rights of its own people. USIA officials and the American public claimed, and likely thought, that they were fighting for freedom. But in actuality, the ideal of freedom often functioned as no more than cover and justification for the less savory goal of American victory at any cost.

Only one group involved could truly claim that they fought for freedom, and that was the musicians themselves. Gillespie, Brubeck, Armstrong, Ellington, and countless other musicians who took part in the tours and who are not mentioned in this paper spoke for recognition of the masses rather than the elite, respect for black people and black music, sovereignty for African nations, mutual understanding, and peace. Even as the United States government exploited them for its own interest, these musicians found ways to fight for freedom, not American freedom, but real freedom which included all peoples, black and white, American and Soviet. At times with subtlety and at times with militance, they fought for a better world than the USIA even imagined.

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