Jam Session
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A cool front in the cold war: Photos depict the era of jazz diplomacy

By Fred Kaplan

Half a century ago, when America was having problems with its image during the cold war, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the United States representative from Harlem, had an idea. Stop sending symphony orchestras and ballet companies on international tours, he told the State Department. Let the world experience what he called "real Americana": send out jazz bands instead.

A photography exhibition of those concert tours, titled "Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World," is on display at the Meridian International Center in Washington through July 13 and then moves to the Community Council for the Arts in Kinston, North Carolina. There are nearly 100 photos in the show, many excavated from obscure files in dozens of libraries, then digitally retouched and enlarged by James Hershorn, an archivist at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. There's Dizzy Gillespie in 1956, charming a snake with his trumpet in Karachi, Pakistan. Louis Armstrong in '61, surrounded by laughing children outside a hospital in Cairo. Benny Goodman in '62, blowing his clarinet in Red Square. Duke Ellington in '63, smoking a hookah at Ctesiphon in Iraq.

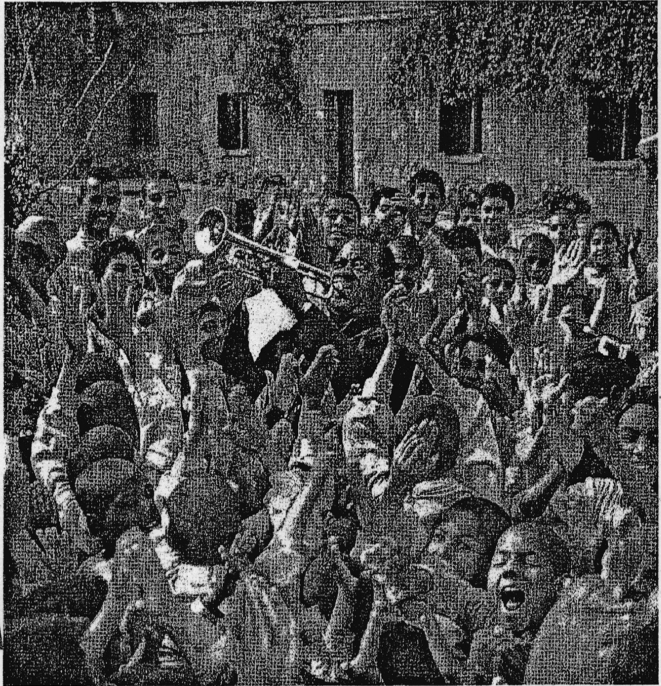
The idea behind the State Department tours was to counter Soviet propaganda portraying the United States as culturally barbaric. Powell's insight was that competing with the Bolshoi would be futile and in any case unimaginative. Better to show off a homegrown art form that the Soviets couldn't match — and that was livelier besides. Many jazz bands were also racially mixed, a potent symbol in the mid to late '50s, when segregation in the South was tarnishing the American image.

Jazz was the country's "Secret Sonic Weapon" (as a 1955 headline in The New York Times put it) in another sense as well. The novelist Ralph Ellison called jazz an artistic counterpart to the American political system. The soloist can play anything he wants as long as he stays within the tempo and the chord changes — just as, in a democracy, the individual can say or do whatever he wants as long as he obeys the law.

Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries

Marshall Stearns Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University

Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Benny Goodman Papers, Yale University



Louis Armstrong House Museum

Clockwise from near left, Louis Armstrong entertaining children at a medical center in Cairo in 1961; Benny Goodman performing for a young audience in Red Square, Moscow, in 1962; Dizzy Gillespie with Nikica Kalogjera, a musician and composer, and fans in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, in 1956; and Count Basie rehearsing in Burma in 1971.

Willis Conover, whose jazz show on Voice of America radio went on the air in 1955 and soon attracted 100 million listeners, many of them behind the Iron Curtain, once said that people "love jazz because they love freedom." The Jazz Ambassador tours, as they were called, lasted weeks, sometimes months, and made an impact, attracting huge, enthusiastic crowds. A cartoon in a 1958 issue of The New Yorker showed some officials sitting around a table in Washington, one of them saying: "This is a diplomatic mission of the utmost delicacy. The question is, who's the best man for it — John Foster Dulles or Satchmo?"

Powell arranged for Gillespie, his close friend, to make the State Department's first goodwill jazz tour, starting out in March 1956 with an 18-piece band and traveling all over southern Europe, the Middle East and south Asia.

The band's first stop was Athens, where students had recently stoned the local headquarters of the United States Information Service in protest of Washington's support for Greece's right-wing dictatorship. Yet many of those same students greeted Gillespie with cheers, lifting him on their shoulders, throwing their jackets in the air and shouting: "Dizzy! Dizzy!"

When Armstrong arrived in the Congo as part of a 1960 tour through Africa, drummers and dancers paraded him through the streets on a throne, a scene captured by a photograph in the exhibition. As late as 1971, when Ellington came to Moscow, an American diplomat wrote in his official report that crowds greeted the Duke as something akin to "a Second Coming." One young Russian yelled, "We've been waiting for you for centuries!"

The stars were happy to play their parts in this pageant for hearts and minds, but not as puppets. After his Middle East tour Gillespie said with pride that it had been "powerfully effective against Red propaganda." But when the State Department tried to brief him beforehand on how to answer questions about American race relations, he said: "I've got 300 years of briefing. I know what they've done to us, and I'm not going to make any excuses."

Armstrong canceled a 1957 trip to Moscow after President Dwight Eisenhower refused to send federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce school-integration laws.

"The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell," he said. "It's getting so bad, a colored man hasn't got any country."

Administration officials feared that this broadside, especially from someone so genial as "Ambassador Satchmo," would trigger a diplomatic disaster. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Attorney General Herbert Brownell that the situation in Arkansas was "ruining our foreign policy." Two weeks later, facing pressure from many quarters, Eisenhower sent the National Guard to Arkansas. Armstrong praised the move and agreed to go on a concert tour of South America.

The jazzmen's independence made some officials nervous. But the shrewder diplomats knew that on balance it helped the cause. The idea was to demonstrate the superiority of the United States over the Soviet Union, freedom over Communism, and here was evidence that an American — even a black man — could criticize his government and not be punished.

The photographs in the exhibition evoke this time when American culture and politics were so finely joined. Curtis Sandberg, the curator at Meridian International, said that during the three years it took to prepare the show his staff would frequently gaze at the photos and say, "Why aren't we doing something like this now?"

But in today's world what would "something like this" be? Jazz was a natural for the cold war. Soviet citizens who hated their government found anything American alluring, especially jazz (and later rock), which was such a heady contrast to Moscow's stale official culture. The same was true, to a degree, in some of the nonaligned nations, which were under pressure from both superpowers to sway toward one side or the other.

The pianist Dave Brubeck recalled in a phone interview that when his quartet played in 12 Polish cities in 1958 several young musicians followed the band from town to town. When he went back to Warsaw just a few years ago, one of those followers came up to him — Brubeck recognized his face — and said: "What you brought to Poland wasn't just jazz. It was the Grand Canyon, it was the Empire State Building, it was America."

What aspect of American culture would present such an appealing face now — not to potential dissidents in Poland or Russia but, say, to moderate Muslims in Syria or Iran? And in a multipolar world, what would make them turn to the United States as an alternative to their own regimes?

Even in its heyday, jazz diplomacy, like any sort of cultural diplomacy, was at best an adjunct to the more conventional brand. As Penny Von Eschen wrote in her 2004 book, "Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War" (Harvard University Press), the audiences abroad "never confused or conflated their love of jazz and American popular culture with an acceptance of American foreign policy." The biggest impact on hearts and minds comes, as always, from what the American government does.

And yet the State Department has a program in jazz diplomacy now. It's called Rhythm Road, it's run by Jazz at Lincoln Center (a three-year contract has just been renewed), and it sends 10 bands (mainly jazz, some hip-hop, all of which audition for the gig) to 56 countries in a year.

It's scaled more modestly than the program of yore. For one thing, no jazz musicians — for that matter, few pop stars — are as famous as a Gillespie, Armstrong or Brubeck in his prime, and the jazz musicians in Rhythm Road are not well known even by today's standards. The program's goals are more modest too. There is no pretense of competing for geo-cultural primacy. But that is what gives this program its cogent post-cold-war spin.

The State Department doesn't tell the musicians what to do, but some of them, either jointly or on their own, have decided to emphasize not their music's peculiarly American quality but rather its resonance with the countries they're visiting.

When the saxophonist Chris Byars took a band to Saudi Arabia this year, he played the music of Gigi Gryce, a jazz composer of the 1940s and '50s who converted to Islam and changed his name to Basheer Qusim. "When I announce that I'm going to play compositions by the American jazz musician Basheer Qusim, that gets their attention," he said. "Afterward several people came up, very appreciative, saying very intensely, 'Thank you for coming to our country.'"

Before the bass player Ari Roland went to Turkmenistan last year, he learned some Turkmen folk songs. His band played jazz improvisations of these songs with local musicians — the first time such mixing had been allowed — and a 15-minute news report about the concert ran on state television several times the next day.

"They saw Americans paying homage to their cultural traditions," he said. "Several people at the concert came up and said, in effect, 'Wow, you're not all imperialists out to remake the world in your image.'"