



## Jazz diplomacy

**THROUGH THE LAST CENTURY**, other countries haven't always been enamored with America's behavior, but even amidst strained political relations or vast cultural chasms, they've carried on a passionate love affair with its jazz.

A case in point: "Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World." Curator for this exhibit of spectacular photographs is Meridian International Center, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit cultural outreach and exchange organization. The vintage images recount the exploits of respected American jazz musicians while they toured Asia, Europe, and Africa as diplomats in a program run by the U.S. State Department from the mid-1950s through the '70s. Primed by post-WWII Voice of America programs by Leonard Feather and Willis Conover, audiences welcomed tours — a first chance for many to see jazz performed live — by artists including Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, and Count Basie, with wild enthusiasm.

The exhibit reveals that, for a short time, America traveled the globe bearing not olive branches, but jazz, with the same peaceful intentions. There's a joyous photo of Louis Armstrong and his trumpet pointed to the heavens, surrounded by children in the courtyard of the Tahhseen Al-Sahha Medical Center in Cairo in 1961. Another photo shows Benny Goodman playing in Red Square, enveloped by fans, only a short time before the Cuban Missile Crisis. This image of Dizzy Gillespie, with composer and musician Nikica Kalogjera, captures the local flavor during Gillespie's 1956 visit to Zagreb, Yugoslavia. The exhibit's program recalls a quote by a Pakistan newspaper during one of Gillespie's tours: "The language of diplomacy ought to be translated into a score for a bop trumpet."

"Jam Session" will be on display at the Meridian's Cafritz Galleries at the White-Meyer House in Washington, D.C., through July 13. The exhibit will then tour the United States for the next two years. [www.meridian.org](http://www.meridian.org) — **Melissa Blazek**

*Photo courtesy of the Marshall Stearns Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.*