

America's Music Around the World The Jazz Ambassadors Program

By Tony Mottola *Jersey Jazz* Editor

During the chilliest days of the Cold War, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev dispatched the famed Bolshoi Ballet to the world's stages to demonstrate the USSR's cultural superiority. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower — at the urging of Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. — countered with Dizzy Gillespie, and the Jazz Ambassadors Program was born.

The golden years of the U.S. State Department-sponsored program that sent legendary jazz performers to the four corners of the globe, from the mid-1950s to the 1970s, are chronicled in *Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World*, an exhibit of photographs and documents assembled from archives around the country by the Meridian International Center in Washington, DC.

The exhibit includes images of Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Dave Brubeck, Charlie Byrd, Duke Ellington, Benny Carter, Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Sarah Vaughn, Randy Weston, and many others "(who) served as cultural diplomats, transcending national boundaries, and making friends for our country," according to the exhibit's press release.

Perhaps. But the program was not without controversies, for example when its "diplomatic" goals to blunt the criticism

of America as a racist country was in conflict with the political and social realities of life for blacks in a Jim Crow and segregated United States. Frustration over a lack of progress on civil rights and school desegregation at home caused Armstrong to cancel a scheduled tour of the Soviet Union. And a Congressional cut in program funding engineered by the Texas Senator Lyndon Johnson drew a harsh response from Dizzy Gillespie.

Ultimately, for the musicians, the mission was to spread the gospel of jazz music to emerging nations, the Soviet Bloc, and anywhere else they were sent, and their converts ran to the millions. And if America could be the birthplace of something so wonderful and freedom loving as jazz, well then, the place couldn't be all that bad, could it?

One thing readily apparent in images included in the exhibit is the seeming immediate connection between the artists and their newfound listeners: Satchmo blowing his horn to the delight of children in a Cairo Street, Dizzy astride a motorcycle in the midst of a throng of admiring Yugoslavians and Benny Goodman looking every bit the Pied Piper performing for a young audience in Moscow's Red Square. The exotic locales of the photos along with the colorful (even in black and white) garb of local residents testify mightily to the universal appeal of the music.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, funding for



left: Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond (center) encounter Indian musicians. Bombay, India, 1958. Courtesy of Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library. Copyright Dave Brubeck. right column, top to bottom: Dizzy Gillespie with Yugoslav

musician and composer Nikica Kalogjera and fans. Zagreb, Yugoslavia, 1956. Courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies, Marshall Stearns Collection, Rutgers University. The Bharatiya Kala Kendra Orchestra performs for Duke Ellington. New Delhi, India, 1963

Courtesy of the Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution.

Benny Goodman performs for a young audience in Red Square. Moscow, Soviet Union, 1962. Courtesy of the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.



Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World will be on display from April 3 – July 13 at Meridian's Cafritz Galleries, White-Meyer House, 1624 Crescent Place, NW, Washington, DC. Following, the exhibit will embark on a two-year national tour. Keep an eye on *Jersey Jazz* for news



of when it reaches our area. For information on *The Rhythm Road American Music Abroad Program* please visit www.jalc.org/theroad.

cultural diplomacy programs steadily declined, reaching a low point by 2000. But in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks the jazz program was reconstituted as *Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad* and is now administered by Jazz at Lincoln Center, averaging some 260 days of touring annually.

And if the diplomatic motives may still be suspect, the music hasn't lost its knack for winning new converts. Consider this newwindpress.com report of a *Rhythm Road* performance by drummer Alvin Atkinson, trumpeter Charlie Porter, bassist Ari Roland, and pianist Eli Yamin in Chennai, India last September:

"For over one hour music hold the centre stage. The composition by Eli Yamin was performed along with students of Jayaganesh Tala Vadhya Vidhyalaya and another with painist Madhav. As the band performed the composition by Colonius Monk (sic) "Evidence," the crowd joined with a hand clapping expedition. The show wrapped up the number The Saint Go Marching In."

Maybe jazz makes for great diplomacy because nothing much gets lost in translation.

JJ



clockwise from top left:

Louis Armstrong entertains children at the Tahseen Al Saha Medical Center. Cairo, Egypt, 1961. Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

Count Basie at the final rehearsal of the popular Burmese song Emerald Dusk. Rangoon, Burma, 1971. L to R: Win Oo, Burma's leading singer and film star; Sandaya Hla Htut, composer and pianist; Basie; unidentified man; U Than Myint, Deputy Director, BBS. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

The Charlie Byrd Trio jams with the Lito Molina Jazz Group at the U.S. Embassy ballroom. Manila, Philippines, 1975. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

Clark Terry and his Jolly Giants perform at the Pakistan American Cultural Center. Karachi, Pakistan, 1978. L to R: Hilton Ruiz (piano; not visible); Clark Terry (trumpet); Victor Sproles (bass); Ed Soph (drums); Chris Woods (saxophone). Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

