

[music]

Redefining Cool

America's Jazz Ambassadors Struck Right Diplomatic Chords

by Gail Scott

During the height of the Cold War in the mid-1950s when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, something inspirational happened that gave birth to the concept of cultural diplomacy. At the urging of then Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the State Department sent America's jazz greats out across the world to Moscow's Red Square, onto the tarmac in Baghdad and into the courtyards of Cairo.

The effort started with Dizzy Gillespie and his big band but later included legends such as Benny Goodman, Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Benny Carter, Miles Davis, Woody Herman, Sarah Vaughan and Washington's own Charlie Byrd. These "jazz ambassadors" were Eisenhower's answer to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's international touring Bolshoi Ballet — a cultural competition that sparked a new age in diplomacy.

Thanks to jazz, people from very different international backgrounds started connecting through the high-spirited, low-down sounds of this distinct American art form. And, it may be fair to say, that wherever America's jazz ambassadors brought their musical magic, the world was never quite the same again.

Today, you can revisit the fascinating journeys of these ad-hoc diplomats by visiting the Meridian International Center's latest and hottest exhibit, "Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World." More than 100 stunning black-and-white images capture musicians visiting 35 countries on four continents as part of this unique and highly successful State Department initiative.



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Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World

through July 13
 (after which the exhibit goes on a national tour)
 Meridian International Center's
 Calfritz Galleries in the White-Meyer House
 1624 Crescent Place, NW
 For more information, please call
 (202) 939-5543 or visit www.meridian.org.

Over a period of 25 years, from the mid 1950s through the 1970s, these jazz legends inspired millions around the world, from royalty and government leaders to university students and young children. To accomplish this unprecedented feat, they ventured behind the Iron Curtain and other far-flung places few Americans had ever seen, often enduring demanding physical conditions, braving political instability, and challenging racial barriers along the way. There was even one fatality when Louis Armstrong's vocalist Velma Middleton succumbed to a heart ailment, dying on tour in Sierra Leone.

But the effort made history and continues to hold great relevance today as, once again, the United States tries to break down its increasingly negative image worldwide.

"The people-to-people interactions of the jazz ambassadors program offer an excellent model as we work to create effective public and cultural diplomacy programs today," said Meridian President Stuart Holliday, a former U.S. ambassador himself (the non-musical variety).

"There is no substitute for these kinds of personal exchanges — especially those based on the arts," he continued. "They allow us to better understand one another, to respect and value our differences, and more importantly, our similarities."

"They also do this on a profound level that can change attitudes and beliefs," Holliday added, noting, "Believe it or not, some of these countries had never seen



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Among the more than 100 photographs at the Meridian International Center chronicling how America's jazz greats toured the world during the Cold War are images of (from top clockwise): Louis Armstrong being carried into the King Baudouin Stadium in the Republic of the Congo in 1960; Benny Goodman performing for a young audience in Moscow's Red Square in 1962; Clark Terry and his Jolly Giants performing at the Pakistan American Cultural Center in Karachi in 1978; and Dave Brubeck receiving a bouquet upon arrival at Baghdad's airport in 1958.

or heard trumpets, trombones or saxophones play together."

In those days of the Cold War, diplomacy was hush-hush and took place behind closed doors. Today, cultural and public diplomacy is a well-known strategy in the so-called battle for the hearts and minds of people worldwide. Ambassadors float their initiatives on international television news shows, and embassies open their doors to the public with lectures, art exhibits, concerts and even glittery fashion shows.

That's what makes this groundbreaking show so exceptional: It documents the earliest efforts to use diplomacy as a way to shatter political and cultural barriers, which would become a staple tool in modern international relations.

To further highlight the immeasurable impact of these State Department jazz tours, on April 11, Meridian held two panel discussions that brought together scholars, public diplomacy experts and jazz enthusiasts to examine how this effort, more than 50 years ago, can shed light on today's public diplomacy needs (also see April 10, 2008, lifestyle column of the Diplomatic Pouch online).

To no one's surprise, the big star of the discussion was Dave Brubeck, who was in town for several events during Jazz Appreciation Month. Participating in the Meridian panel, the famed jazz pianist showered the audience with his favorite

Continued on next page



From left, jazz legend Dave Brubeck and his wife Iola, Meridian International Center Board Member Meryl Chertoff, and Meridian Vice President of the Arts and exhibit curator Curtis Sandberg attend a discussion for the Meridian exhibit "Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World."

Continued from previous page

stories of life on the road as an American jazzman.

Later that evening, Brubeck sat in the front row listening to a live concert by the Andrzej Jagodzinski Trio, Poland's leading jazz ensemble. After the Polish jam session and before his own Brubeck Institute Jazz Quintet performed, *The Washington Diplomat* asked Brubeck how it felt to listen to Polish jazz musicians performing in the United States when decades ago he toured Poland while it was under Soviet occupation and people could be punished for even listening to a record of American jazz.

He winked and simply sang, "It's wonderful, it's marvelous, that you could care for me." Obviously, it is not only the jazz ambassadors who embraced the world, but their audiences who embraced them as well.

Gail Scott is a contributing writer for The Washington Diplomat and lifestyle columnist for the Diplomatic Pouch.

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