

Red and Hot, Blue and Cold: Jazz and Opening the Iron Curtain with Cultural Diplomacy

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During the Cold War when the terrifying prospect of global nuclear annihilation became a postmodern defining point of humanity, the “Communist Reds” and the “Democratic Blues” jockeyed for influence across the globe. The Soviets showcased their standards in classical music and ballet while America shipped jazz overseas as a representation of the country’s democratic and equal society. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the United States and Soviet governments engaged in cultural exchange programs, which led to the creation of the Jazz Ambassadors program. The Jazz Ambassadors Program was effective as a form of cultural diplomacy because the participants exercised agency and autonomy on their tours, disregarded both Soviet and American governmental goals and imposed their own instead, and reached out to the people to form strong bonds of diplomacy and friendship through music.

One African American jazz musician, Dizzy Gillespie, was chosen to inaugurate the U.S. State Department’s Jazz Tours Program in 1956, even though he carried a Communist Party membership card. However, he did not actively promote Communist ideology or even attend any meetings, which made his inclusion in the program more palatable. During the tour, he discovered his new purpose: serving as an autonomous ambassador for jazz itself (and if that happened to line up with the U.S. State Department’s goals, well, that was just a happy coincidence).¹ In what would become habit for the jazz ambassadors, Gillespie appealed to the people, not just to the elites and the politicians as the State Department desired. He did this by opening up his concerts to the masses and the poor instead of playing for just the elites. He also appeared in local garb, staged theatrics on accident to show commonality with his audience, and made sure to respect religious holidays. He wired President Eisenhower to tell him:

¹ Alyn Shipton, *Groovin’ High: The Life of Dizzy Gillespie* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), 280; 283-284.

Jazz is our own American folk music that communicates with all peoples regardless of language or social barriers. I urge you to do all in your power to continue exploiting this valuable form of expression of which we are so proud.²

Gillespie realized what the U.S. government was attempting to do with the Jazz Tours.

However, he did tell his wife Lorraine: “I sort’ve liked the idea of representing America, but I wasn’t going over to apologize for the racist policies of America...If they ask me any questions, I’m gonna answer them as honestly as I can.”³ Gillespie asserted his own authority and his own will to promote jazz and democracy abroad, ignoring the State Department’s restrictions of what he could say and for whom he could perform.

On the other side of the cultural divide, the Soviets were experiencing a similar cultural crisis in the post-Stalinist youth, who exercised their agency by rejecting the cultural and political norms of the Soviet state. These so-called *stiliagi* (“style hunters”) flaunted their wealth, dressed in clean-cut, crisp suits, embraced Western ideals, focused on the present, smoked, drank, and loved jazz in direct opposition to their parent’s generation. Select *stiliagi* participated in the black market, dealing in cocaine, American jazz records, and cigarettes. Similarly to the early bebop artists in America after the war, many *stiliagi* preferred silence and detachment to a debased language and a debased mass Soviet culture and entertainment industry.⁴ These Soviet youths imitated the actions of American jazz musicians, who in turn reinforced those kinds of behaviors when they finally arrived in these countries on the Jazz Tours.

Drawing parallels between Socialist Realism and the swing movement in America helps to explain the socio-cultural rebellion within both Cold War superpowers at the time. In brief

² Ibid, 282-284.

³ Gillespie, *To Be or Not To Bop*, 414.

⁴ S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York, Limelight Editions, 1994), 236-243.

terms, “Socialist Realism...dictated more traditional designs, heroic statuary, and monumental and neoclassical architectural forms.”⁵ Specifically, “the proletarianists assaulted science fiction, detective stories, fairy tales, folk music, jazz, urban song, and escape movies” that emerged during the Soviet Union’s New Economic Policy period from 1921 to 1928. The proletarianists referred to this “as the effusion of decadent intellectuals produced for the unhealthy appetites of degenerate businessmen.” The Soviets enacted cultural repression on a larger scale than America did, and the Soviets attacked most forms of cultural expression whereas American musical criticism focused mainly on jazz at the time.⁶ Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, jazz was believed to be “primitive, jungle music” by much of American society. However, swing music developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s, whose characteristics include written-out arrangements of tunes as well as musical quotations of other well-known works, contrasting musical lines and rhythms of the reeds and the brass, and the imposition of structure upon what was somewhat “chaotic.”⁷

The imposition of Socialist Realism upon Soviet society and the imposition of structure upon jazz in America both impeded the expression of agency and individuality. Soviet youth society faced repression of dissenting views and subversive actions. As this surge of repression resurfaced, jazz in the gulag prison system actually flourished. The camp administrators essentially turned the gulags into autonomous fiefs, which helped to preserve the various cultures of the men and women who were imprisoned.⁸ Socialist Realism was in essence a method of controlling culture for Stalin, and when imposed, it squeezed culture through a filter to become a

⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 269.

⁶ Richard Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64-65.

⁷ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7-10.

⁸ Richard Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture*, 120-122.

bland, grey version of what was acceptable. Similarly, in the United States, beboppers fought back against swing because they felt that it was bland, grey, and “dead.” As such, they categorically refused to play nationalistic music for a country full of hypocrisy in regards to civil rights. These beboppers rebelled against racial segregation and cultural norms between the races, and they demanded to be seen as equals, individuals, and artists.⁹

The American and Soviet rebellions against government and culture appropriated jazz for unique reasons, but they both resisted common trends and were determined to carve their own path independent of what others thought. Soviet citizens weren't fighting for racial equality as much as they were fighting for their own freedom and style of expression against their parents' and other societal values. America, arguably the nation with the most freedom at this time, still segregated its citizens along racial lines while hypocritically promoting equality abroad. Many musicians (jazz and otherwise), when they traveled abroad, found this illusion shattered. They discovered they were treated with more equality while abroad and when the people of the nations they visited asked questions, they answered truthfully about conditions in the United States. Oftentimes visiting jazz ambassadors composed songs (based on local, national, and/or traditional melodies) or learned them from local musicians, incorporating them into a global musical family. This resulted in musicians endearing themselves to the people.

One example of musicians endearing themselves to their foreign audience is the Brubeck family. The Brubecks consisted of Dave, his wife Iola, and their sons Darius and Michael. They were on a tour of Europe in 1958 when they were told by the State Department that they could not continue their tour into Poland. They eventually found assistance in getting to Poland, and as

⁹ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*, 228-240.

they performed throughout the country, jazz enthusiasts followed them from city to city because they loved the music tremendously, and were fascinated with Dave and Iola's kids.¹⁰

Another way that the Brubecks endeared themselves to the local musicians was by having secretive but friendly meetings and jam sessions. As Iola told a jazz critic after the tour:

Jazz in Poland was underground until after the Polish October Revolution of 1956 and the emergence of the Gomulka government as quasi-independent. Prior to that... Polish jazz fans and musicians had to meet illegally in cellars to hear the music they liked.

Dave Brubeck often spoke during his performances, and when he did, he reinforced the reason why the State Department sought to send jazz musicians abroad in the first place: "No dictatorship can tolerate jazz. It is the first sign of a return to freedom."¹¹ There is a considerable probability that his Polish performances had more positive diplomatic impact than any of his other European performances.

Not all Jazz Ambassadors were as effective in the diplomatic effort. Benny Goodman, given his attitude, was a strange choice for the Jazz Ambassadors Program. He was a participant for several reasons, however. One is that he demanded to be a part of the program, partially to find out what had happened to his merchandise that he sent over to the Soviet Union.¹² Secondly, he was allowed to go on tour by the Soviets, who restricted travel into the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. A key component of the Soviet's criticism of American democracy was the segregation and racial inequality within American society, which explains why the Soviets rejected a tour featuring an African American band led by African American Louis Armstrong

¹⁰ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004), 50-51.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 51. The government of Wladyslaw Gomulka in Poland took inspiration from the earlier resistance of Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia in 1948. Gomulka's resistance to the Soviet Union (seen as Titoist in nature) inspired Hungary to take similar action, which the Soviets then promptly crushed. Cited from T.G. Fraser and Donette Murray, *America and the World since 1945*, 41; 71-72.

¹² Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 92-93; 100-101.

but accepted an integrated band led by the Caucasian Goodman.¹³ Soviet officials did this to preserve the integrity of their propaganda that stated that American society was not as equal as they claimed it to be, because only Caucasians were given positions of leadership in bands and within American society as a whole. Thirdly, there was a dispute about the style of music that best encompassed jazz. Bebop was the African-American musician's movement to re-appropriate jazz for themselves away from the commercialized white hands of America. The Soviets regarded jazz suspiciously, but were at least tolerant towards swing, with its tight structure and form. Swing appealed to the Soviet top brass because of its vague similarity to classical music, the musical strength of the Soviets. For these reasons, Goodman was allowed to tour the Soviet Union.

Official diplomacy jumped off the platform that Goodman's cultural diplomacy established and played the part of damage control during events like the Cuban Missile Crisis that occurred after Goodman's tour. Goodman may not have been a great diplomat, but the musicians in his band still connected with the local Soviet musicians, and both could express dissatisfaction with the lack of freedoms they were given. This showcases the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy over official diplomacy. Or to state it differently, "[Goodman] was winning the hearts of the Russians in his own way, not according to the State Department plan."¹⁴ Despite some of the criticisms aimed at Goodman, he ultimately was a well-chosen representative of jazz because swing was the subgenre that he stuck to stubbornly, and the subgenre that the Soviet officials could tolerate.

¹³ Ibid, 94-96. Also see S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot*, 271.

¹⁴ Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 106-118.

The autonomy and individual authority that Soviet jazz musicians could exert from 1962 onwards provide a fascinating look into both the Communist system and Soviet thought on jazz, both official and unofficial. Some jazz forms could be accepted by true Leninists, and such a statement was in fact published in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* (the Young Communist League's newspaper). By playing this American musical form but composing their own Soviet classics, officials hoped to lessen the impact of underlying American values and to control jazz as another aspect of culture, because the Soviet government sought to control everything. An offshoot of the Union of Soviet Composers required that up-and-coming jazz ensembles and individuals register with them and be graded on their musicianship, primarily on their classical music skills and sight-reading while improvisation played no part whatsoever. And these auditions for registration were often presided over by corrupt officials. When faced with the classic musician's dilemma of playing or eating, some Soviets turned to non-musical forms of work. Other Soviet musicians turned to conservative orchestras or established their own groups, clubs, and jam sessions, the latter being a common way to blow off steam after commercial performances. "[Soviet jazz's]...inner development remained autonomous, beyond the control of any public agency."¹⁵

The constant reversals of official Soviet policy on jazz, the view that jazz was by its nature anarchistic and led the youth to political dissent, and Premier Khrushchev's humiliation during the Cuban Missile crisis, when combined with the Soviet-Sino split in 1963, paved the road for the Premier's removal from office in 1964.¹⁶ With Premier Brezhnev's assumption of control afterwards, the Soviet Union drifted towards an era of stagnation and slow decay. Soviet history had come full circle: "It all began with the bulk of society being composed of a rather

¹⁵ S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot*, 262-267. The Komsomol was established to raise the Soviet youth as proper Communists by indoctrinating them and grooming them to act appropriately in all regards of life.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 273-275.

primitive...peasantry, facing an action-oriented bureaucratic state, and ended with a complex urban society...facing a stagnating bureaucratic state.”¹⁷ Soviet society had changed drastically from the uneducated peasant masses of the October Revolution and even from the collectivized, Stalinist society at the end of the Second World War to an intellectual, proletariat society. The proletariat formed the majority of the population, and the educated citizens demanded respect for their interests but weren’t granted this wish. In addition, they couldn’t acquire what they desired, even if it was of a high enough quality to purchase. The earlier *stiliagi* movement, while definitely separated from official Soviet policy and ideology, was in a sense passive. The emerging and more active dissident movement in the mid-to-late 1960s saw the regime crack down upon “parasitism,” that is not being productive to Soviet society and culture. These dissidents actively criticized and discredited the regime. The regime often responded to those criticisms and protests with armed force. The dissidents felt that “[t]he ideal citizen . . . was not unconditionally obedient but an active, autonomous participant in political affairs.”

Meanwhile, the mid-to-late 1960s and the 1970s bore witness to the rise of rock and roll and the British invasion of America by bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Jazz experienced a decline in its authority over the music scene, in its autonomy as an art form, and in the number of tours dedicated to it whereas rock and roll tours began to increase.¹⁸ The assassinations of Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. destabilized the country. The decline of jazz in mainstream appeal as well as the crackdown on African American activism spoke to a changing culture within America, which affected its cultural diplomacy and

¹⁷ Moshe Lewin in Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 447-448.

¹⁸ Marc Myers, *Why Jazz Happened* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013), 161; 164.

exportation. Ambassadors that did travel the globe in the 1970s found societies as tumultuous as their own.

Jazz truly represented America for much of the twentieth century. As a musical form originating from Africa, its enslaved descendants, and the struggle to etch out an existence in this uncaring world, jazz was understood by the people. They could relate to it, no matter what race they were, or what ideology or religion to which they ascribed. However, the underlying hypocrisy of the Jazz Ambassadors Program contributed to its unraveling. How could any government expect musicians of a repressed minority to travel abroad to promote democracy and the equality of man when that was absolutely not the case at home? Another aspect of the Ambassador Program's decline is that of simple economics. President Eisenhower prophetically warned America about the rising industrial-military complex, and yet the escalating nuclear arms race remained an issue throughout the Cold War. For jazz, the invasion or resurgence of various musical styles like rock and roll, pop music, and rhythm and blues caused jazz to lose economic presence and its prominence as America's true musical style. Ideologically, the political reduction of the Cold War to "the Reds versus the Blues for all time" affected both superpowers. Even back in the 1960s, Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin stated: "...the powerful factor of ideology...was deeply ingrained in the minds of the Kremlin leaders. It kept affecting our relations with the United States, at times to the detriment of our own basic interests."¹⁹

The musical bonds of friendship that were forged by the Jazz Ambassadors transcended Cold War ideological battles, but the program itself was flawed from the beginning. Foreign

¹⁹ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (New York, Times Books, 1995), 140.

policy is usually controversial, but the traditional diplomatic method of attempting to solve problems lacks the impact that cultural diplomacy had during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Sadly, the final living Jazz Ambassador from this time period, Dave Brubeck, died in 2012; he firmly believed, however, that cultural diplomacy still has a role to play and that it should be revitalized:

Because, if we don't start understanding each other, there's not going to be a world. It's crucial. Martin Luther King said, 'We must live together as brothers or die together as fools.' Now, you can't say it much more directly than that. We've got to get an understanding, not just in music, but in religion, in every form of cultural exchange. We could do so much more. And maybe we will - if we're scared enough - do the right things. Because survival is a strong influence in all of us... In almost every culture, if you dig deep enough, you're going to find a oneness of man. One of the reasons I believe in jazz that is the oneness of man can come through the rhythm of your heart. It's the same anyplace in the world, that heartbeat. It's the first thing you hear when you're born - or before you're born - and it's the last thing you hear.²⁰

It's a sobering realization that humanity still has not learned this lesson that we are all human, first and foremost, despite the staggering variety of languages, religions, and cultures. However, the Jazz Ambassadors proved that we are capable of moving past the conflicts we suffer if we can only realize that we are all human and all share an ability to enjoy expressing ourselves culturally.

²⁰ "Diana Gioia's interview with Dave Brubeck" transcript, NEA Jazz Masters, accessed 28 Nov. 2013, <http://arts.gov/honors/jazz/dave-brubeck>

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