

The Global Politics of Jazz in the Twentieth Century

Cultural Diplomacy and “American
Music”

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Introduction

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Introduction

On the evening of 29 April 1969, an event at President Richard Nixon's White House saw many of America's most well-known jazz musicians freely mingling with senior US officials and politicians. This was one of those infrequent instances in the American capital when the usually unrelated worlds of Washington DC high politics and the royalty of American jazz collided – a musical occasion arguably more spectacular than anything ever held before in the White House. After dinner in the State Dining Room on the west side of the building, guests moved to the East Room, which was usually used for ceremonies and press conferences, to excitedly wait for the biggest event scheduled for the day, a birthday party for a respected jazz icon. There were many prominent figures from the American jazz scene in attendance, including trumpeters Clark Terry and Bill Berry, trombonists J. J. Johnson and Urbie Green, saxophonists Paul Desmond and Gerry Mulligan, pianists Dave Brubeck, Earl Hines, Hank Jones and Billy Taylor, bassist Milt Hinton, drummer Louie Bellson, guitarist Jim Hall, and vocalists Joe Williams and Mary Mayo. Willis Conover, who had been promoting jazz since the mid-1950s on his popular radio program *Music USA* – a segment on the US government's official radio station Voice of America (VOA) – served as the Master of Ceremonies (MC) at this distinctive event.

While the musically gifted guests essentially embodied the history of American jazz, they were simply there to celebrate the seventieth birthday of one of the most legendary figures of the American jazz scene: Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington. On this auspicious evening, Ellington and the other guests witnessed a unique performance by this line-up of jazz royalty, which opened with “Take the A Train,” and was followed by a medley of other well-known pieces, including “Chelsea Bridge,” “Satin Doll” and “Sophisticated Lady.” Other popular numbers, including “In a Sentimental Mood,” “It Don't Mean a Thing,” “Caravan” and “Mood Indigo” also captivated the audience. Later in the evening, to everyone's delight, Ellington himself joined the performance by playing “Pat” on the piano, which he dedicated to President Nixon's wife.¹

The formal highlight of the evening occurred when Nixon awarded Ellington the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest official award given to civilians. The President described decorating Ellington with this prestigious honor as “most appropriate” and went on to explain that:

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When we think of freedom, we think of many things. But Duke Ellington is one who has carried the message of freedom to all the nations of the world through music, through understanding, understanding that reaches over all national boundaries and over all boundaries of prejudice and over all boundaries of language.

Ellington, as praised by Nixon, enhanced the quality of “American music” and expanded the frontiers of jazz, while simultaneously retaining his individuality and freedom of expression – forming the very soul of this music. After graciously thanking the President, Ellington briefly spoke about the philosophy he lived by – passed on to him by his old friend and composer Billy Strayhorn – describing this life path as:

Freedom from hate, unconditionally; freedom from self-pity; freedom from fear of possibly doing something that may help someone else more than it would him; and freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel that he is better than his brother.

Following this exchange, Nixon asked the audience to stand up and sing “Happy Birthday” to Ellington “in the key of G.” Reflecting the festive nature of the event, and probably surprising many in attendance, Nixon himself played the piano for this final song.²

This snapshot of one evening at the White House could have been remembered superficially, as just another musical event at the White House, as musical performances were not uncommon. However, this event symbolizes the indivisible connection between jazz and freedom, best outlined by Strayhorn’s way of life and the ideals behind the Presidential Medal of Freedom as awarded to Ellington. Moreover, in examining this event, we can see how jazz and global politics had become interwoven. For example, Conover transmitted jazz externally as a symbol of freedom and American democracy through the VOA. Many of the musicians invited to the White House that evening had also been involved in State Department-led cultural diplomacy, and had had direct experience at the forefront of the cultural Cold War pitting America against the Soviet Union. Therefore, this historic event – Ellington’s birthday being celebrated at the White House – is symbolic of this book’s major perspectives on the global politics of jazz.

Jazz and Americanism

Since its birth in the creole city of New Orleans, jazz has developed with improvisation as one of its fundamental features. From New Orleans jazz in the early twentieth century through the swing movement of the interwar period, and bebop after the Second World War to free jazz during the 1960s, jazz saw a variety of styles and evolutions emerge. Throughout this process, more or less, a freer mode of expression was pursued at each iterative stage, in contrast to classical music which tends to emphasize

accuracy in music notation. Jazz has been, therefore, associated with the philosophy of freedom, as shown by its reliance on individual creativity. Herein lies the foundation as to why jazz relates to politics. Jazz has not only been understood as a genre, but also as a symbolic musical icon representing the notion of “America,” embodying the ideals of the Founding Fathers.

The ideological conflict that defined global politics in the second half of the twentieth century set the context for a relationship between jazz and the public image of “America.” As US-Soviet relations deteriorated in the postwar period, the two camps put forward competing political systems, thus initiating a battle for winning the hearts and minds at both domestic and international levels. In this context, cultural exchanges attracted much official attention as a means to influence and control global public opinion. While wearing an apolitical cloak, cultural programs were promoted as part of highly sophisticated Cold War strategies. The death of Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, in 1953, triggered the Soviet cultural offensive, which emphasized traditional Russian high culture. For its part, the US government, long reluctant to encourage governmental involvement in international cultural exchanges – seeing them better catered for by the private sector – finally acknowledged their policy significance by the mid-1950s, at least as part of a counter-strategy against Soviet cultural influence.

Expectations for jazz to perform such a role were substantial. Under the Eisenhower administration, the State Department began dispatching notable jazz musicians around the world, including to an array of Communist countries. In addition to the musicians who played at Ellington’s birthday party, many famed figures such as Louis Armstrong and Sarah Vaughan also conducted performances overseas in accordance with their own personal agendas. Ellington himself visited many Asian and African countries as a jazz ambassador, not to mention his successful Soviet tour in 1971. Jazz, as a symbol of freedom and democracy, was expected to dispel the negative image associated with America’s domestic racial problems that were making global headlines at the time.

The cultural complexities of America vis-à-vis Europe also became another factor behind government interest in jazz, as a cultural and diplomatic strategy. Sometimes criticized as a “cultural desert” by some intellectuals, the US government undoubtedly felt compelled to improve America’s global cultural image. While many believed classical music was a quintessentially European cultural asset, in similar fashion, jazz was seen as intrinsic to American culture. Just as Nixon had told Ellington, jazz had been identified as “American music.” Or more precisely, jazz *had to* be “American music” in postwar America. In this sense, what jazz was expected to embody in America’s postwar cultural diplomacy was American nationalism, or Americanism.

Functions of jazz

However, this book is not intended to provide another historical account of the relationship between jazz and Americanism. Rather, this book examines whether jazz functioned merely as a symbol of Americanism. Or more precisely, it offers new perspectives on a variety of discourses and interpretations of jazz outside America. The book therefore examines the extent to which jazz was understood as “American music” both inside and outside America. In this vein, considerable focus is placed on exploring the function of jazz as a means of criticizing America, thereby advocating the necessity to emancipate jazz from “American music.” This relates closely to the fact that jazz historically served not only as a symbol of freedom, but also of resistance. Originally, jazz developed under the Jim Crow regime in America. For those seeking to put an end to the practice of segregation, jazz symbolized an act of protest. In this period, jazz’s symbolic function as both expressing a thirst for freedom and a will to protest were two sides of the same coin. Therefore, listening to jazz in a society where basic freedoms were curtailed took on a critical tone against the existing order.

In America, that jazz could symbolize resistance was seen in the 1960s civil rights movement. Musicians in support of the movement were the manifestation of their objections to the existing reality of America, where they believed the ideals of the Founding Fathers had not been fulfilled. Notwithstanding this deep-seated philosophy of resistance, jazz was still able to maintain a distinct connection with Americanism. Whereas W. E. B. DuBois and several other notable civil rights activists abandoned their home country and moved to Africa, many stayed and dreamed of fulfilling their progressive ideals through pursuing domestic political and social reforms. To put it differently, those who stayed to reform the system from within embodied Americanism, in that they believed in the advent of an idealized future “America.”

Rather ironically, despite the idea that jazz had distinctive American cultural roots – particularly the embedded notion of resistance – some European intellectuals used this core idea to criticize what they saw as insipid Americanism creeping into European life, a process derogatorily termed “Coca-Colonization.”³ The irony was clearly lost on many of France’s postwar anti-American intellectuals who happened to be avid jazz fans, while also critical of parts of American culture. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir ardently embraced jazz, believing it embodied their philosophy, while simultaneously publishing articles criticizing American racial as well as Cold War policies. At the same time, with France’s international influence rapidly waning in the face of the new hegemon, French jazz journals lamented the reality of segregated America. In early postwar French society therefore, jazz provided these writers, and other leftist groups of the day, with a practical means through which to express anti-American feelings.

Additionally, jazz successfully encouraged transnational ties. In the State Department-led jazz diplomacy, jazz musicians soon engendered empathy with local musicians and fans outside America, well beyond what government

officials had initially hoped. Through the medium of jazz, those in Communist bloc countries were also able to expand their transnational ties with people inside and outside the bloc. Looking at this historical evidence in light of global politics today, it is perhaps worth considering the potential jazz has clearly shown in helping build tolerance between cultures, overcoming political divides, and fostering inter-cultural dialogues.

Keeping these various contexts of jazz in mind, we should not limit jazz's historical role to Americanism and its associated ideas. Rather, there is a need to examine the development of jazz outside America, including across diverse historical periods and geographical places. Such an approach promises to shed important light on the effects of jazz within a global context.

Global political dynamism and jazz

In recent years, the study of jazz has been approached from various disciplines and perspectives, providing a rich repository of scholarly research for this book to draw upon. Taking a broad inter-disciplinary approach, this book reconsiders the unique functions jazz has played in the history of global politics, and discusses the global political dynamism that jazz generated. The definition of global politics in this book is relatively broad, as shown by not exclusively focusing on "inter-national" relations, but on transnational movements such as peace movements, the civil rights movement, decolonization and cross-cultural dialogues, among other related themes. In addition to government officials and musicians, a wide variety of non-state actors, such as producers, critics, intellectuals and dissidents, are set against a dynamic political context in various places around the world. More specifically, this book employs a rigorous, yet broad, historical inquiry approach covering many countries not previously examined in this context, including America, countries in Europe and Japan, as well as a number of Communist countries.

The existing literature on jazz diplomacy reveals at times problematic relations between artists and government officials. Penny M. Von Eschen's seminal work *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* succeeds in illustrating the complex frictions jazz generated inside America – among policy elites, audiences and particular artists. Through her insightful research on US State Department-sponsored jazz tours, Von Eschen highlights the paradox of the US government's strategy of sending African American jazz musicians globally to represent America as a free and democratic country when its racial problems remained to be solved. Revealing interacting relationships of such factors as the Cold War, decolonization, race and cultural exchange, Von Eschen not only foregrounds the importance of jazz as a black culture to legitimize America's global strategy, but provides numerous stimulating examples of how musicians and the State Department pursued different agendas.⁴ Investigating the same jazz program, Lisa Davenport's *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* examines the role of jazz in transforming the US-Soviet relationship. Davenport uses similar but different sets of primary sources to Von Eschen's work, elaborating more on the specific contexts in which the jazz tours were carried out. Davenport

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also describes jazz diplomacy as affirming the existence of a cultural realm that was often unaffected by economic and strategic considerations.⁵

Incorporating multiple analytical perspectives other than the Cold War, Von Eschen defines the character of jazz as international and hybrid music. And this book concurs with her argument on this point. However, despite her best intentions to provide a perspective to examine the postwar dynamics of international politics, most of Von Eschen's source materials are limited to those archived or published in America, resulting in a body of work that falls within the confines of American history.⁶ In so doing, Von Eschen neglects constructing a more balanced global history of jazz, which can only be achieved if the interpretations of the music both inside and outside America are examined. In order to broaden our understanding of jazz's characteristics and functions there is a need to incorporate more non-American jazz discourses. That is, jazz's encoded messages – or the political subtexts of jazz – were often negotiated in local contexts outside America, with the result being the emergence of multiple interpretations of the meaning and nature of the music. It is true that the US State Department and American jazz musicians pursued different agendas, but so did authoritarian regimes, intellectuals, leftist groups, critics, musicians and jazz aficionados outside America. To put it differently, this book is intended to introduce a more “globalized” view of jazz. Whereas Davenport's stated purpose of underscoring the power of jazz in diminishing the legitimacy of Communism only partly succeeds, due to the narrow historical parameters in which jazz's symbolic functions are examined.⁷ Rather than giving the US-Soviet confrontation the highest analytical priority, what we need to do is de-bipolarize the historiography of jazz diplomacy, and incorporate a more diverse array of jazz discourses as seen inside and outside America.

Moreover, while both Von Eschen and Davenport set their research time frames somewhere between the mid-1950s to around the 1970s, this book contextualizes the US State Department's jazz diplomacy inside a broader framework, focusing on twentieth-century global political dynamics. This enables us to better trace the genealogy of the “American music” discourse. For this purpose, this book uses a variety of sources, primary as well as secondary, which were accessed in America, Europe and Japan. While there are emerging works reviewing the development of jazz outside America, they also tend to limit their perspectives to specific periods and places, failing to fully capture the power of jazz and its effects more globally. Among them, E. Taylor Atkins's edited book *Jazz Planet* shares the same objective as this book in examining jazz in a globalized context. Viewing jazz as a harbinger of globalization, Atkins and his other contributors successfully show how jazz was variously interpreted in different parts of the world.⁸ While the essays in *Jazz Planet* all problematize nationalistic viewpoints found within previous jazz research, their perspectives are considerably diverse, including elements such as race, modernity and aesthetic values. Instead, this book provides a more in-depth analysis of the politics of jazz, effectively contextualizing this idea within jazz diplomacy. Through reevaluating the uniqueness of jazz – frequently seen as exclusively “American

music” – this book ultimately allows us to deconstruct the exclusive relationship between jazz and its birthplace, America.

In the following chapters, while some sections cover similar case studies as the existing literature, and consult similar sources, they are being introduced in this book using new historical and comparative perspectives. Chapter 1 looks at the origins of the current jazz discourse, which equates jazz with “American music” both inside and outside America. The interwar period is examined to further explore the genealogy underpinning the “American music” discourse. During the New Deal era, some started to believe, supported by leftist groups, that jazz was quintessentially “American music” embodying the ideals of the Founding Fathers. Meanwhile, jazz outside America was gradually de-Americanized through various interpretations, which enabled Nazi Germany, Vichy France and Japan to propagate their own anti-American causes around jazz.

Chapter 2 considers the impact of postwar ideological confrontation against the context of domestic jazz scenes inside America and Communist bloc countries during the 1940s and 1950s. It argues that as American society problematized the infiltration of Communism, New Deal Liberalism of the 1930s was put in an awkward position. For example, Norman Granz, who is usually associated with Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) – the title of many recordings and numerous concerts – unequivocally advocated for racial integration. Because of this stance, however, he soon became a symbol of something un-American and was subsequently placed under the supervision of security authorities. Ironically, in the meantime, jazz followers in Communist bloc countries were persecuted precisely because jazz represented “American music.”

Chapter 3 explores ideas around the universality and particularity of jazz by detailing five jazz musicians who were sent around the world during the 1950s: Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Wilbur De Paris, Dave Brubeck and Jack Teagarden. The shift in global politics during the 1950s resulted in the US government recognizing the importance of government-sponsored cultural exchanges globally, while simultaneously promoting its own reinterpretation of jazz. Rapidly jazz, long denied any public status in representing America abroad, became “American music,” reflecting the nation’s founding principles. In this context, the US government’s jazz ambassadors program commenced in the latter half of the 1950s. This chapter re-examines various local reactions found outside America to these musicians’ performances, as well as the frictions that inevitably arose among State Department officials, American musicians and even local fans and musicians outside America, mainly due to a set of competing interpretations around the meaning of jazz.

Following the arguments presented in the previous chapter examining tensions in the jazz ambassadors program, Chapter 4 explores the discursive frictions of the 1960s over the external value of jazz, which arose among US officials, jazz musicians and music critics who were engaged in the jazz ambassador selection process. Race-conscious African tours by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Randy Weston were expected to strengthen cultural ties between America and Africa, but the represented “America” was

socially problematic. Although Ornette Coleman's free-style jazz had been driving the Black Power movement in America – and he was highly regarded by critics selecting America's jazz ambassadors – State Department officials were nonetheless worried by the late 1960s about the unforeseen consequences of sending an ambassador abroad that might be too provocative. The gap in interpreting the strategic value of jazz among government officials, musicians and critics foregrounded the politics of who should represent America during the era of decolonization and the American civil rights movement.

Chapter 5 looks at the critical jazz discourse by examining the anti-American element of jazz in some Western countries in the period from the late 1940s to 1960s. In France, where jazz was understood as originating in black culture, the music rarely embodied Americanism but rather the weak and oppressed. The French Existentialists criticized America through *Les Temps modernes* while still loving jazz – a development perhaps not unrelated to the declining position of France in the postwar world. The situation was similar for another declining empire, Britain, where trad jazz revival reached its high point in the 1950s, reflecting certain imperial nostalgia. In West Germany, jazz served as a medium for overcoming a negative historical image, through which its own jazz ambassadors program commenced in the 1960s with the cooperation of the Goethe Institut. Whereas in Japan, jazz discourses in the 1960s turned “black” as they stressed the need for solidarity between the Japanese and “colored people.” This chapter shows how jazz began to influence national identities in different and diverse corners of the world.

Chapter 6 discusses how the Soviet Union sought to contain the effects of jazz, while also providing the Communist regime with a reason for admitting American jazz ambassadors into the Soviet Union during the 1960s and the early 1970s. The Soviet authorities sought to improve relations with America, while minimizing the perceived risks to their people posed by American jazz and the idea of Americanism. Soviet tours by Benny Goodman, Earl Hines and Duke Ellington, as well as the unofficial jazz ambassador Gerry Mulligan, show the degree of official acceptance that occurred in parallel with the containment of their own jazz scenes and the Sovietization of the domestic jazz discourse. In this sense, the authorities' treatment of American jazz musicians provides a useful analytical lens through which to understand jazz's precarious position in the Soviet Union during this period.

Elaborating further on the jazz discourse in Communist countries, Chapter 7 looks at the local functions of jazz in Eastern Europe during the period from the mid-1950s to 1980s. As part of conciliatory measures toward its citizens, and to keep them away from rock music – a growing symbol of juvenile delinquency and decadence – jazz was gradually institutionalized and nationalized from the mid-1950s. This development paved the way for many American jazz ambassadors to visit Eastern Europe, much more frequently in the 1970s than in previous decades. Meanwhile, following détente in the early to mid-1970s, the politics of jazz again came to the fore in Czechoslovakia. When members of a small jazz fan group were arrested in 1986, this triggered a wave of

transnational criticism by musicians, novelists and peace activists, soon generating a united front against the oppression of jazz in this country.

Chapter 8 explores the US government's jazz diplomacy after the 1980s, as well as how jazz might interconnect disparate groups of people in today's globalized world. Since the 1980s, the discourse equating jazz with "American music" saw a revival, in line with the US Congress repeatedly adopting resolutions celebrating the lofty idea of Americanism. However, controversy remains as to the ownership of jazz, and whether it is a symbol of racial integration in America or is solely symbolic of black culture. Further complicating the ownership questions, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has determined that 30 April is International Jazz Day, disseminating values seen intrinsic to jazz such as cross-cultural dialogue, and respect for human rights and diversity. This chapter notes that although jazz has its roots in America, the music has become a shared cultural asset of the world, coming about via myriad historical routes.

The Conclusion summarizes the above arguments by reaffirming that jazz does not present, *a priori*, any specific or intentional message. Rather, it is through ourselves that jazz has been allocated a variety of messages. As time passed, places shifted and its styles changed, accordingly we found symbols of hope, fear, decadence and modernity in jazz through our own subjective interpretations. In that sense, jazz has long been a symbol of more than just music. Jazz was born in and remains a potent symbol of America. Still, jazz goes beyond Americanism. The various routes jazz followed in the process of expanding its popularity outside America obscure its roots, which has resulted in an enriched hybridity of jazz today.

Notes

- 1 Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California, US (Online), Box RC-2, WHCF: SMOF: Office of Presidential Papers and Archives, "President Richard Nixon's Daily Diary April 16, 1969–April 30, 1969," 29 April 1969. www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/PDD/1969/007%20April%2016-30%201969.pdf [assessed 27 February 2017].
- 2 Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon, 1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), pp.338–39. For more on the event, see Edward Allan Faine, *Ellington at the White House 1969* (Takoma Park: IM Press, 2013).
- 3 Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
- 4 Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006), p.4.
- 5 Lisa E. Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013), pp.4, 143.
- 6 Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, p.24.
- 7 Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy*, p.4.
- 8 E. Taylor Atkins (ed.), *Jazz Planet* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2003), pp.xi–xxvii.