

Jazz Diplomacy Paradox: Jazz Within The Maelstrom of Cold War Politics

Written by Mauro ter Heyne

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MAURO TER HEYNE, MAY 27 2023

In 1956, famous trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie became the first of many jazz musicians to go on tour around the world to promote America's artistic excellence. Within the geopolitical context of the Cold War, the use of music (or any other form of art) to enhance and promote some form of cultural hegemony became recurrent, with both the United States and the Soviet Union sending thousands of artists around the globe on "secret" missions. The double agenda was often not explicitly felt as such by the artists themselves, as they got an opportunity to perform outside of their national confines and earn good money doing so as well. Yet, in the case of jazz musicians, and more specifically the Afro-American artist such as Dizzy Gillespie, these expeditions contained a mixed bag of sentiments. Originally stemming from the hardship and oppression of Afro-Americans within America's racially segregated society, jazz was now supposed to promote the aesthetic supremacy of the American nation; even though the meaning of jazz inherently contradicted the image of American freedom and democracy, this is what the "jazz ambassadors" needed to portray to the outside world. As Lisa Davenport (2015, p. 141) succinctly indicates, "Jazz diplomacy created a bold Cold War paradox: the cultural expression of one of the nation's most oppressed minorities came to symbolize the cultural superiority of American democracy."

This essay will delve deeper into the aforementioned *Jazz Diplomacy Paradox*.^[1] First, by examining the discrepancy between America's public diplomacy vis-à-vis the domestic realities, and putting this into the perspective of the US State Department jazz tours, starting in the late 1950s with Dizzy Gillespie and followed closely by Dave Brubeck. After this, a comparative musical analysis will attempt to illustrate how a different domestic reality and racial experience, also considered in the grand scheme as part of identity-building, influences the musician's style of playing and choice of subgenre within the overarching music called jazz. More abstractly, the essay questions how the embodiment of Afro-American art became the figurehead of American civilization, how such a contradiction could endure in practice, and perhaps most importantly, how human experience and the adjacent interpretative and connotative capacities allow us to project a different meaning onto music depending on the individual, time and place.

Cold War, Cultural Diplomacy, and America's Domestic Incongruities

Post-WWII, the standard of living of the Afro-American community remained dismal. Racial segregation was still legally enforced under the Jim Crow laws, which would not be abolished until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The music industry was also highly segregated (Monson 2007, p. 29). As a result, the late 1950s can be considered an era where socio-economic, educational, and political disadvantages were highly institutionalized for black Americans. Although some instances proved hopeful for social change, such as the landmark *Brown vs Board of Education* case in 1954, which considered racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, other events showed that the Civil Rights movement and its defenders were not close to reaching their objectives within America's so-called free and democratic society. One of these events was the Little Rock crisis in 1957 when nine Afro-American students enrolled in Little Rock High School were prevented from entering. Amongst others, Louis Armstrong held a critical standpoint in the aftermath of the crisis and cancelled his upcoming State Department tour in the Soviet Union (Perera 2017, p. 32). The events also led to the reluctance of the US State Department to sponsor black jazz musicians between 1957 and 1960 for cultural tours (Davenport 2015, p. 147).

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From the start of the Cold War, jazz music became “a central fixture of American public diplomacy” (Vaughn 2016, p. 2). Especially with the radio broadcasts of the Voice of America (VOA), hosted by Leonard Feather and Willis Conover, the idea of “jazz ambassadors” spread with the programme’s increasing popularity around the world (Von Eschen 2004, p. 13). Particularly in the aftermath of the Little Rock incident, the US needed to “effectively implement cultural containment without relinquishing broader Cold War interests” (Davenport 2015, p. 150). Unlike classical music, jazz music was uniquely considered America’s child and, against the backdrop of domestic racial conflicts and the subsequent international criticism, the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU) hoped that the promotion of Afro-American jazz musicians would ease the widespread critique (Davenport 2015, p. 141):

The mere presence of black jazz musicians in international venues accomplished the State Department’s goal of demonstrating African American success stories — a powerful antidote to media depictions of racial suppression and alienation.

Ansari 2016, p. 275

In November 1955, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., originally from Harlem, convinced State Department to include jazz in its cultural programmes and succeeded in putting forth Dizzy Gillespie as the first jazz ambassador to go on tour (Von Eschen, 2004, p. 6; Monson 2007, p. 112). At first, this decision was resisted by many state officials, who were assured that “Gillespie’s music would reduce the American cultural image to ‘barbarians’” (Wagnleiter 2006, p. 295; Perera 2017, p.2). Yet, Gillespie’s tour proved to be very successful, particularly evident from his concert in Athens:

They loved us so much that when we finished playing they tossed their jackets into the air and carried me on their shoulders through the streets of the city.

Von Eschen 2004, p. 34

Although Gillespie’s classic quote “*I’ve got 300 years of briefing*” shows how secure and cautious US state officials were with their new ambassador, Gillespie nevertheless could not resist voicing his opinion off-script on race and US foreign policy (Von Eschen 2004, p. 43). It shows how, despite the official function, jazz and diplomacy inextricably linked their fate to the Civil Rights movement and the fate of Afro-Americans within the United States.

When Dave Brubeck went on his first tour in 1958, it was presented as “elite” high culture music by the US Information Service (Time, 8 November 1954 as cited by Perera 2017, p. 38). His quartet consisted of all white members (Brubeck on piano, Paul Desmond on alto saxophone, Joe Morello on drums) except for the bass player, Eugene Wright (Perera 2017, p. 38). However, epitomizing the *Jazz Diplomacy Paradox* was their inability to play in several places in America’s “South” upon their return. Internationally they were received with open arms but domestically, they were often asked to replace Eugene Wright for a white colleague, which Brubeck refused (Variety, 4 March 1959 as cited in Perera, p. 38). Similarly, Gillespie’s band was well-received in Athens Greece but not in Athens Georgia (Perera 2017, p. 36). These incongruities show how US foreign policy and propaganda were full of contradictions and false portrayals of domestic realities. In the midst of it, “jazz diplomacy thus remained steeped in both America’s cultural realism and its cultural idealism” (Davenport 2015, p. 143).

The Dizzy-Dave Divide: How West and East Coast jazz differed in the 1950s

Although a surprising choice for the tours at the time, Brubeck was a pioneer of West Coast jazz, a new modern style of jazz that was growing in popularity (Perera 2017, p. 38). Nevertheless, several black jazz musicians strongly opposed the CU’s choice in favour of Louis Armstrong and cohorts, signalling a rift in US jazz policy (Davenport 2015, p. 153). Whereas in New York, jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie had been developing bebop since the 1940s, the West Coast style was more relaxed and with a smoother sound, similar to cool jazz; the eloquence of compositions and arrangements prioritized over improvisation, which dominated the much freer bebop scene. The choice for West Coast jazz thus not only signalled a preference for a white jazz artist in the wake of growing racial

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tensions but also symbolized a dismissal of the more rebellious and revolutionary character of bebop.

Interestingly, in Brubeck's quartet, it was perhaps Paul Desmond who added the defining West Coast sound to the tour. His soft and lyrical tone over "Brubeck's unusual and chord-heavy accompaniment" made the music more understandable for a general audience (Lea, 2022). In a sense, West Coast jazz was the white and Westernized version of jazz, approximating classical music through strong arrangements and the use of unconventional instruments such as the French horns and tubas. As such, it explains why US policymakers were eager to use Brubeck as an example of American jazz and "high culture" outside of the country. In the aftermath of the 1958 tour, Brubeck and Desmond recorded "Take Five," which unexpectedly became a hit despite its odd time signature (5/4). Brubeck, inspired by his recent journeys through Eastern Europe and Asia, also recorded "Jazz Impressions of Eurasia" (1958).

Generally, these tours were a source of inspiration for both Brubeck and Gillespie. In India, Brubeck's jam sessions with Indian musicians led to his composition "Calcutta Blues" (Jankowski 2016, p. 274). For Gillespie, especially his South America tour had a colossal impact on his future music. In particular, the Afro-Brazilian drumming found in Samba, Bossa Nova, Partido Alto, and so forth, was of great influence in further linking "the African diasporic and Latin America connections to jazz" (Ibid.). For years to come, Gillespie would always feature songs of Antonio Carlos Jobim in his concerts and invited pianist Lalo Schiffrin from Argentina to join his band in 1961 (Von Eschen, 2004, p. 41).

By the time of Gillespie's first tour in 1956, he was a renowned jazz bebop trumpeter, having not only played but developed the style with the likes of Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, and Max Roach. Bebop originated as an attempt to rejuvenate jazz in the wake of newly felt political self-confidence among Afro-Americans. Purposefully directed against the social and aesthetic standards of America's white middle classes, bebop was a symbol of resistance against the growing commercialization of big bands and a reassertion of the rights of Afro-Americans to maintain and cherish their own cultural identity. The fast tempos, complex harmonic variations (altered chords and chromatic changes), rhythmic superimposition, and so forth, were instrumental to Gillespie's intention to challenge white America's appropriation of Afro-American music, as bebop would be difficult to copy (Von Eschen 2004, p. 1). Interestingly, this "hip and militant" character of Gillespie remained unnoticed by President Eisenhower when he accepted the trumpeter as America's first jazz ambassador (Ibid.).

The roots of jazz stem from a struggle for social equality, a need to express hardship felt from systemic oppression in a country self-lauded as democratic and free. Jankowski (2016) is spot on when he indicates that:

The insistence on jazz as emblematic of American democracy, however benign the claim may at first seem, is entrenched in the cultural philosophy of American exceptionalism, which, in turn, not only serves the interests of the ruling elites but is inseparable from the chauvinistic desire to extend American democracy and its purported values to the rest of the world.

Jankowski (2016 p. 283)

In other words, the use of jazz during the Cold War as part of America's cultural diplomacy is indicative of the top-down disregard for issues of identity and ownership. Portraying jazz as an all-American art form misappropriated a culture created out of systemic injustices. In doing so, American policymakers denied the problem's existence and thus eliminated any potential dialogue within the socio-political debate.

Yet, for black musicians, the tours were a trade-off because they also brought more prestige to jazz at home and increased support for the Civil Rights movement abroad (Fosler-Lussier 2015, p. 96). The tours "brought to the fore the cognitive dissonance between the openness and potential for multiple significations of musical expression" (Jankowski 2016, p. 259). As such, the jazz played outside of the US came to symbolize different things for different people. It shows how the 'hyperconnotativity' of music can lead to a multiplicity of associations and processes of meaning-making which are only more stimulated by its abstract character (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, p. 32).

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Conclusion

By looking at the *Jazz Diplomacy Paradox*, this essay has briefly examined the incongruities between international and domestic representations of jazz in relation to the socio-political environment in which it was created. Although jazz ambassadors such as Brubeck and Gillespie were musically influenced by their voyages, the misrepresentation and misuse of jazz were deemed controversial. Especially for Gillespie, who was instrumental in the creation of the rebellious bebop style, these tours were particularly Janus-faced. The Afro-American experience of racial segregation is quintessential for jazz's development, both intellectually and aesthetically, and especially reflected in the more rebellious bebop style vis-à-vis the smoother, perhaps more conformist, West Coast jazz of Brubeck. As such, the essay shows the inherent tension in jazz music, as both a tool to escape and construe reality in different contexts and by different agents.

[1] See Lisa Davenport (2015) for a thorough conceptual and historical analysis on the paradox of jazz diplomacy.

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