Cold War Jazz

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I have always loved my last name. It is oddly spelled, for sure, but that feature conferred a comforting uniqueness on me. Even though other people might have had names that sounded the same, very few spelled the name the way I do. Of course, my name created some minor challenges too. My name is constantly misspelled. My prescription bottles have read “Klausx.” I have wasted hours over the phone repeating the proper sequence of letters to exasperated customer service representatives. Countless people felt they were being funny by telling some variant of a joke that involved Santa Claus.

All of this resulted in my repeating one sentence quite often: “I am Hungarian.” That sentence explained my situation, calming down people struggling to comprehend a name that featured an “s” followed by a “z.” Even though I consider myself an American first, my father was born and raised in Hungary, coming to the US during the 1956 revolution. His family name, “Klausz,” is a Hungarian spelling of the German given name “Claus”; it most likely became a family name because in Hungary the family name is stated first and the given name second.

A partial result of continually saying “I am Hungarian” is that I frequently remind myself of my heritage. As such, I find myself deeply interested in Eastern Europe. Next year I will also be teaching an elective on the Cold War, giving me further incentive to think about that region of the world in preparation for the course. So, I came to this Institute with an eye towards Hungary and a desire to learn about what, if any, connections there were between American jazz and popular music and the Soviet Union and its satellite countries.
A major component of this Institute has been an individual research project. Mine focused on music criticism, and I was particularly curious about how music criticism was used to create an image of America in the context of the Cold War. Jazz and jazz criticism, I found, played major roles in defining and selling an “American” identity during the Cold War. The United States Information Agency, a government body charged with informing the world about the United States, utilized jazz as a form of “cultural diplomacy.” Beginning in the 1950s the USIA sent many jazz musicians on world tours that included the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie and Benny Goodman took on the role of “cultural diplomats,” with members of the press referring to these tours as “secret sonic weapons.” But I wondered, why did the United States choose jazz musicians as cultural diplomats? What did the government feel was so valuable in jazz that it was worth showing off to the world?

For answers to these questions, I looked into further programs sponsored by the USIA. Perhaps chief among these in influence was the Voice of America radio program, *Music U.S.A.* The program, run by the white disc jockey Willis Conover, broadcast American jazz and popular music throughout the world for two hours daily. Though at times Soviet countries jammed the transmissions, the program became quite popular in cities like Moscow, Tallinn and Warsaw. Listening to *Music U.S.A.* was for many people living in the Soviet Union the only way to hear jazz music. As such, Willis Conover’s presentation of the music held particular importance. Further, as Conover was a chosen representative of a major government agency, his ideas became a de facto official US position on jazz internationally. I thus thought it prudent to investigate these ideas, to find out what image the United States wanted to project to the world using jazz. In John S. Wilson’s September 13, 1959, article in the *New York Times* entitled “Who
is Conover?" Conover explained his views on the meaning of jazz music. He stated, “The musicians agree on tempo, key and chord structure but beyond this everyone is free to express himself. This is jazz. And this is America. That’s what gives this music validity. It’s a musical reflection of the way things happen in America.” For Conover, the freedom to improvise in jazz music reflected the freedoms he saw inherent in the United States. In this conception, jazz was a music that could have existed only in the United States, never in a planned and authoritarian country like the Soviet Union.

Of course, the United States in the 1950s and 1960s was not the purely free country it purported to be. Segregation removed the rights of vast portions of our population, and this policy deeply undermined the country’s desired reputation as a free country. However, the success of jazz music and of some black jazz musicians allowed the United States to pretend to be the international community where black Americans shared in the country’s vaunted political freedoms. In the same article referenced above Conover stated, “Jazz corrects the fiction that America is racist. Minorities have a tough time everywhere, but the acceptance and success of so many Negro musicians and singers in jazz in the United States makes it obvious that someone like Louis Armstrong, for instance, is not an exception.” Clearly, Conover’s views on racial equality were extremely problematic, a willful misreading of society and denial of the harsh reality of segregation. Nonetheless, they revealed a desire within the United States government to downplay the government’s racist policies internationally. Jazz, then, did not reflect true American freedom, but rather projected an idealized image of what our country could or should be. Instead of correcting a fiction, as Conover states, jazz was used to create a fictionalized version of our country for the world to admire.
Having toured extensively for the USIA, Dave Brubeck understood his role in helping to create this fictionalized version of the free United States. Brubeck and his wife, Iola, wrote a musical comedy, *The Real Ambassadors*, that reflected on the dramatic discrepancy between United States domestic policies and the image the country wanted to project internationally. The musical starred Louis Armstrong as a jazz ambassador who confronts these inconsistencies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Armstrong and Brubeck appeared to have had vastly distinct emotional responses to the content of the musical. In a June 9, 2009, interview with Michele Norris on NPR’s *All Things Considered* program, Brubeck reflected that he intended the musical to treat the theme of segregation humorously, pointing out the “ridiculousness” of a segregated country selling itself as a bastion of freedom. However, Brubeck also noted that Armstrong would cry every time he sang “They Say I Look Like God.” Brubeck observed that, for Armstrong, the material “was just too emotional.” While both Armstrong and Brubeck felt the hypocrisy of United States governmental policies, they did so in dramatically different ways.

Professor Early often asked us, “What is music?” We, of course, never found a good answer to that question. Music can be something different for each person, a point illustrated so clearly by Armstrong and Brubeck. What is undeniable is that music has immense power, so much so that the US government felt it a viable propaganda tool. Music plays a role in shaping identities and forming ideas, and for better or worse jazz music helped to shape perceptions of US culture and politics during the Cold War. Reflecting on this Institute and the research I have done, I find myself asking questions about how people assign meaning to music and what people have the largest platforms from which to share their opinions. It seems absolutely critical that we ask these and similar questions when trying to interpret and understand music in its context. While I suspect these and countless other questions about music will never find solid answers,
the questions alone provide a valuable framework through which to study music in a historical context.

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