

Penny M. von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004)

A half-decade after the beginning of the jazz tours, the jury was still out as to their achievements and effects. In the words of the writer and lyricist Iola Brubeck, ‘The entire jazz community was elated with the official recognition of jazz and its international implications.’ Yet jazz artists who had participated in the tours had experienced first-hand the uneasy juxtaposition of the arts and less than transparent foreign policy agendas. And as members of integrated bands, they were uniquely steeped in the ironies of the export of jazz ambassadors at a time when America was still a Jim Crow nation and civil rights activists were faced with violent resistance and the inaction of the federal government. Following their own tour through Eastern Europe and the Middle East in 1958, Dave and Iola Brubeck addressed these ironies in the satirical musical [*The Real Ambassadors*](#) [*if interested, click link to hear this on Youtube*], a 1961-62 collaboration between the Brubecks and Louis Armstrong. [...]

In *The Real Ambassadors* the Brubecks addressed the glaring contradiction in a U.S. strategy that promoted black musicians as symbols of the triumph of American democracy when America was still a Jim Crow nation. [...]

In the song ‘Remember Who You Are’, the Brubecks evoked and evaluated the briefing they received before embarking on these tours:

Remember who you are and what you represent.

Always be a credit to your government

No matter what you say or what you do

The eyes of the world are watching you

Remember who you are and what you represent

Never fix a problem, always circumvent

Stay away from issues

Be discreet – when controversy enters, you retreat.

Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be or Not to Be Bop* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978)

I was the first one. After that, a lot of the bands went. Benny Goodman went to Russia; Duke Ellington went to Russia; Earl Hines went to Russia. Several bands went to Africa, like, Herbie Mann. It was all ‘mixed’ to show the ‘democratic’ spirit, but if we hadn’t done well, there wouldn’t have been any more bands going over.

I took it as an honour, really [...] I felt highly honoured, and I liked the idea of a big band that wouldn’t cost me any money. [...] I sort’ve like the idea of representing America, but I wasn’t going over to apologize for the racist policies of America. When I talked to Lorraine on the phone from Paris, she said, ‘Well, they want to brief you.’

‘Brief?’ I said. ‘I’ve got three hundred years of briefing. I know what they’ve done to us, and I’m not gonna make any excuses. If they ask me any questions, I’m gonna answer them as honestly as I can.’ [...]

People asked us a lot of questions about racism in the United States. But they could see it wasn’t as intense because *we* had white boys and I was the leader of the band. That was strange to them because they’d heard about blacks being lynched and burned, and here I come with half whites and blacks and a girl playing in the band. And everybody seemed to be getting along fine. So I didn’t try to hide anything I

said, 'Yeah, there it is. We have our problems but we're still working on it. I'm the leader of this band, and those white guys are working for me. That's a helluva thing. A hundred years ago, our ancestors were slaves, and today we're scuffling along with this problem, but I'm sure it's gonna be straightened out some day. I probably won't see it, completely, the eradication of racial prejudice in the United States, but it will be eliminated. [...]

Jazz was a big thing in Eastern Europe. Though in a lot of the socialist countries it was forbidden to play American music, they had black market recordings that circulated among the artists. We didn't have any of those political problems because they probably considered us government workers since we were playing under the auspices of the State Department. Jazz is very big in socialist countries now, but, during the 'cold war,' in a lot of the countries it was forbidden to have records by jazz artists. They could have Bach and Beethoven, but they couldn't have jazz. They finally came around and got hip that jazz was something worth having.

In Eastern Europe now, you're officially sponsored by the government, and the critics write in glowing terms about the music. It's a far cry from the days when they felt that jazz was decadent and chaotic music which made the people less capable of being disciplined and therefore weak. Jazz has taught the world a lot about the necessity for balance between the two. They gave parties and jam sessions for us in Yugoslavia that lasted all night. The Yugoslav musicians got down on their knees to us, and one lady claimed that for creating true friendship one jazz band was worth more than a hundred ambassadors.

Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973)

Outside of our four concerts a week, every member of our company is expected to attend all the receptions and similar affairs. One notable point is that we are not required to restrain ourselves in the expression of our personal, political, social, or religious views. As citizens of a free country, there are no restrictions on our tongues. We are to speak as free men. They are very explicit in advising us that we should always say what we think in or out of favour of the U.S. [...]

At five o'clock there is a big press conference which I shall never forget. At first, everything goes along cosily in the sitting-room of my suite. [...] After the conference has rolled along comfortably enough for about an hour, this cat with the 'snake eyes' creeps out of a corner.

'Why', he asks, 'doesn't the United States subsidize the artists like Russia?'

'I don't quite get the meaning of the question', I answered.

'Russia, for instance, subsidises the ballet.'

'I suppose because ballet is a classical art, and to sustain the devices of an art hundreds of years old, as I believe ballet is, it is necessary that it be subsidized. In the United States, competition is in everything, and the tempo is so fast that artists, scientists, and everybody else are bent on discovering new devices.'

I think I get away with that, and I go on to explain that it will be very difficult to make comparisons with the U.S. and other countries in the world because we speak different languages and have different values. In many ways the U.S. is like every other country in the world, but in others it is quite different. For example, practically every nation has its haves and have-nots, but the U.S. is the land of the haves and want-mores. There are thousands of people in the U.S. who were born in poverty and wound up millionaires or in very powerful political positions. It is a matter of opportunity, competition, and luck. All this annoys my questioner, and, judging by the looks on the faces of the other people in the room, I have won a little skirmish. So he comes back strong.

'What about the race question?' he asks.

‘We have the same thing again,’ I reply. ‘Everywhere, there are many degrees of haves and have-nots, minorities, majorities, races, creeds, colours, and castes.’ [...]

‘The United States has a minority problem,’ I continue after a pause.

‘Negroes are one of several minority groups, but the basis of the whole problem is economic rather than a matter of colour.’

While my opponent is busily thinking, I give him another opportunity by introducing another subject.

‘The United States has an extremely accurate news service and the press enjoys almost complete freedom,’ I claim. ‘Did you, incidentally, hear about the five little girls who were burned up in that church down in Alabama the other day?’

‘Yes,’ he says with great triumph.

‘Well, that was only a couple of days ago, and I’m not sure anybody else would have let such news get out that quickly if it had happened in their backyard.’ [...]

The public in Russia or anywhere else is busy pursuing what it thinks it will enjoy, and I am doing the same thing. Whether or not we will converge in agreement is something I so not know, but when audiences, one after the other – *all* that we play to here – keep paying their admission fees and coming to hear us, I am inclined to believe they know who they want and expect to hear. Moreover, any audience that spends three or four hours listening to us – well, that audience is not to be considered the public – they are our friends. [...]

Someone in Washington working for the opposition, who thinks he will irritate the Russians so that I have an unpleasant visit, prints and spreads a rumour that I am unhappy with the food and am losing weight. It is a rumour that does not harm at all. In fact, I gain ten pounds while in Russia. I am very, very partial to caviar, and I discover a lot of satisfying combinations with the borscht. I also teach the chefs to make cheeseburgers. [...]

When we eventually leave Russia, we feel we are leaving a lot of friends.