

Project Title:
Music U.S.A- Jazz Hour

Project Description:

To use jazz music as a symbol of American democratic values and cultural diversity, as well as an emblem of cultural dissidence.

Learning Point:

Music serves as a universal global language, and when contested, can become an anthem of dissent. The broadcast of jazz music on the *Music USA-Jazz Hour* program was a potent utilization of American soft power during the Cold War.

Organisation:

Voice of America

Case study

Approaches:

International Broadcasting, Cultural Diplomacy

Themes:

Social Justice and Diversity

Scenario:

With the election of Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952, US informational and cultural outreach received a more focused approach, including an incorporated United States Information Agency (USIA). In wake of the barriers that had arisen between East and West, the USIA sought to use Voice of America (VOA) as a cultural hammer to knock at the foundations of the Soviet Union and nations behind the Iron Curtain. Given the prominent status of RIAS in Berlin and its successful cultural outreach to East Germany, the model was set for VOA's plan in 1955 to create a music program devoted to jazz music seemingly directed towards Northern Europe but reaching Communist Eastern Europe and the USSR.

On January 6, 1955, VOA began broadcasting *Music USA-Jazz Hour*, under the gravely-voiced stewardship of Willis Conover. Although jazz music was neither new to the Soviet Union, nor to the VOA repertoire (previous machinations included Leonard Feather's *Jazz Club* a decade earlier), the *Music USA-Jazz Hour* program struck a chord with Eastern European and Soviet society. Jazz, with its free-style nature and individualistic liberty was interpreted as the antithesis of the Communist collective society, and became an example of cultural rejectionism.

Despite the serious and sustained attempts by Communist authorities to jam the signal

of VOA, listeners continued to steadily tune in to the program; meanwhile, tapes and x-ray plates of *Music USA-Jazz Hour* broadcasts became prized contraband for music lovers and jazz aficionados.

Program Activity:

For six nights a week, Conover broadcast *Music USA- Jazz Hour* to an adoring fan base that reached nearly 30 million regular listeners in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at its peak. As noted in his obituary, “Conover would bombard Budapest with Billy Taylor, strafe Poland with Oscar Peterson and drop John Coltrane on Moscowⁱ.”

Either in spite of, or perhaps because of, the Stalinist authorities’ circulation of propaganda placards proclaiming, “Today he plays jazz and tomorrow he’ll betray his country,ⁱⁱ” jazz music took on dissident significance to the *stiliagi*- the anti-establishment Soviet youth. The *stiliagi* adopted the music as the anthem of their dissonance in the face of the Stalinist ban on the music as “decadent.” As noted by S. Frederick Starr in *Red and Hot*, “Jazz, with its emphasis on individuality and personal expression, became the *lingua franca* of dissident Soviet youth, the argot of jazz their verbal mediumⁱⁱⁱ.” The suppression of jazz turned it into a forbidden fruit to which VOA was willing to adeptly harvest and feed to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Conover quickly became an icon to music lovers behind the Iron Curtain. His visit to Poland in 1959 saw Conover hailed as idol, and later surveys found him to be the most second most well-known American in the Soviet Union^{iv}. Meanwhile, Conover literally became the *voice of America*, as Soviet youth emulated Conover’s distinct diction as their own style of spoken English.

The music’s very nature in free-form expression stand as representation of free society, and Conover referred to jazz as “the music of freedom,” that helped feed an organic, homegrown movement of dissent behind the Iron Curtain.

In setting up the program, the State Department and USIA were well aware of the political nature of the music. The cultural-affairs officer at U.S. Embassy in Moscow stated, “The whole business of jazz was a political question, not cultural^v. Yet despite any political motives for the program, Conover’s refused to allow his program to be politicized; this refusal gave an increased authenticity and enhanced the “soft power” pull of the music.

Analysis:

Music USA-Jazz Hour was a brilliant and unrivaled success for American PD efforts precisely because it became associated not only with American cultural values and diversity, but also as a symbol of dissent. However, beyond dissent, the music also served as a symbol of hope to those living without freedom. Through *Music USA-Jazz Hour*, jazz music became perhaps the most effective soft power weapon in America’s arsenal, and served as a major attracting force to Western culture.

Furthermore, as a counter to Soviet depiction of America’s racial problems, jazz’s African, African-American and Caribbean heritage, served as a positive symbol of American cultural and racial diversity.

The example of *Music USA-Jazz Hour* demonstrates the effectiveness of non-overt political use of cultural programming. Precisely because Conover did not preach, but rather let the music and its style speak for itself in the face of Soviet repression, the music took on an even greater meaning.

For all the aforementioned reasons, Willis Conover and his jazz program reached iconic status in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; his radio program and work has often been cited as a key factor in winning the culture battle within the Cold War.

Sources and Links:

On the Jazz in the Soviet Union, see: Feign, Leo (ed.), Russian Jazz: New Identity, London: Quartet Books 1985; S. Frederick Starr, Red and Hot, New York: Oxford University Press 1983.

On the VOA, see: Alan Heil, Voice of America, New York: Columbia University Press 2003; Nicholas Cull, The Cold War and the United States Information Agency, New York: Cambridge University Press 2008

On Willis Conover, see: Robert McG. Thomas, Jr, "Willis Conover is Dead at 75: Aimed Jazz at the Soviet Bloc," *New York Times* May 19, 1996, p.35; Nicholas Cull, "Obituary: Willis Conover," *Independent*, May 22, 1996; Ripmaster, Terrence, Willis Conover: Broadcasting Jazz to the World, Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., 2007.

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Notes

ⁱ Robert McG., Jr, Thomas, "Willis Conover is Dead at 75: Aimed Jazz at the Soviet Bloc," *New York Times* May 19, 1996, p.35

ⁱⁱ Hans Krumpf, "My Trips to Russia," from Leo. Feign (ed.) , Russian Jazz: New Identity, London: Quartet Books 1985, p.73

ⁱⁱⁱ S. Frederick Starr, Red and Hot, New York: Oxford University Press 1983, p.241

^{iv} Nicholas Cull, "Obituary: Willis Conover," *Independent*, May 22, 1996

^v CF Starr, Red and Hot, p244