

The Washington Times

Jazzing up America's image abroad

By Jenny Mayo
April 11, 2008

It's 1955, Cold War tension is simmering, and America is desperate to win friends and influence people overseas.

A new exhibit at Meridian International Center fondly recalls one popular solution the country devised to answer that challenge.

"Jam Session: America's Jazz Ambassadors Embrace the World" is a collection of about 100 photographs that recounts the 20-plus years during which the U.S. State Department sponsored international tours for some of the nation's greatest jazz pioneers and stylists.

The exhibit contains images of a trumpeting Louis Armstrong being mobbed by grinning children in Cairo; of Benny Goodman playing the Pied Piper in Red Square; of Duke Ellington and his orchestra performing for the Emperor of Ethiopia; and of Dizzy Gillespie charming a cobra, as well as other Pakistani residents.

These and other snapshots not only commemorate the important work that these icons did as representatives of our nation abroad, but also point to ways in which we might again "embrace" the world and engage it in a dialogue about America's virtues.

Our first official jazz ambassador, Mr. Gillespie, set out to dazzle denizens of Latin America, Southern Europe, the Middle East and South Asia in 1956, and as news of his success as a cultural envoy spread, the State Department responded by booking other artists. U.S. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was largely responsible for the initial idea, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Emergency Fund helped it come to fruition.

The president was "deeply aware of criticisms of U.S. racism abroad and very aware of the image of the U.S.," says Penny Von Eschen, author of "Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors

Play the Cold War" and co-curator of the Meridian exhibition. "He didn't like the stereotype that Americans were materialistic, and Europeans had their culture and felt very strongly about showing off American culture."

While the Soviets capitalized on the strength of their classical music and dance troupes (particularly the Bolshoi Ballet), the American government recognized that they had something unique to offer in jazz. Here was an art form that was not only born on our soil, but that highlighted many of the country's key values — among them, improvisation, the synthesis of diverse cultural influences, racial integration and recognition of the individual even when working within a group framework.

Willis Conover, the internationally recognized host of the Voice of America jazz show "Music USA," said that in jazz, "the musicians agree on tempo, key and chord structure, but beyond this, everyone is free to express himself.... People in other countries can feel this element of freedom. They love jazz because they love freedom."

Indeed, the State Department tours gave the jazz ambassadors opportunities to win the hearts of the elite, of local musicians and of everyday folks in places they visited, from Ghana to Greece, Burma to Baghdad. They also won favorable attention from foreign press, increased the visibility of jazz worldwide and promoted American democratic values overseas while promoting civil rights back home.

Walking through the commemorative exhibit, one might wonder, given America's current image problem overseas, "Why aren't we doing this now?"

The answer is: We are.

Funding for this and other U.S. cultural diplomacy programs "all but evaporated through the '90s," following the collapse of the Soviet Union, says Alina Romanowski, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Professional and Cultural Exchanges at the State

The Washington Times



DANA LEONG PERFORMS IN VIETNAM
Photo by Lai Hien

Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

However, in the wake of Sept. 11, she adds, "we're rebuilding it."

Monies allocated for cultural diplomacy have more than tripled since 2000, and the Jazz Ambassadors program is still intact. Currently, it's called "The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad" and is administered by Jazz at Lincoln Center.

"Right now, we're working on the 2008 program, which is sending 10 bands to 56 countries," Ms. Romanowski says.

Since 2005, the State Department has also incorporated "urban" or hip-hop-influenced artists into the fold in order to engage younger audiences.

"It's the music of the young," says Carl "Kokayi" Walker, who toured the Middle East and Asia on America's dime with the D.C.-based hip-hop group Opus Akoben.

Hip-hop, an art form that sprouted out of urban poverty, also shares many of the fundamental American values found in jazz.

New York City-based musician Dana Leong's quartet does a little bit of both these uniquely American styles and had the chance to play a State Department tour of Southeast Asia last year. "Most of the people we met had never been outside their city or country before," he says.

Both he and Mr. Walker note that much (sometimes all) of some foreign countries' exposure to American culture comes through TV, particularly MTV. In fact, Mr. Leong says that in many places, people think America is nothing but Britney Spears and blue-eyed blondes. He's actually half-Chinese, half-Japanese, and his tour mates boast Italian, Jewish, Australian and Nicaraguan heritage.

When it comes to hip-hop, Mr. Walker says that many overseas audiences expect gold-toothed gun-toters, particularly when the musicians are black, as is his crew. Through concerts, radio performances and workshops (many of them free), groups like his are working to present other nations with a realistic image of Americans and the art they are capable of producing.

"You don't have to understand what people are saying to feel music," Mr. Walker says, explaining why he thinks music is such a vital tool in the cultural diplomacy arsenal. "When I blow a sax, you can tell my happiness or my pain by the way I play my notes. Esperanto doesn't really exist, so I can't speak the universal [verbal] language, but I can definitely speak to you in this other universal language of music."

"Jam Session" will be up at Meridian International Center (www.meridian.org) through July 13. Today, the organization is hosting two panel discussions: "The Future of Jazz as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy" at 3 p.m. and "Take Two: Reflections of the 1958 Tour" at 4:45. Dave Brubeck will participate in the latter, then at 7:30 will join in a performance by the Brubeck Institute Jazz Quintet.