

Freedom Sounds: Polish Responses to the Dave Brubeck Quartet's 1958 State Department Tour

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(With appropriate mention of Ingrid Monson's book with which my paper coincidentally shares its title.)

For more than two decades during the Cold War from 1956 to 1978, the United States incorporated tours by American jazz artists as an essential element in its Cold War struggles against the Soviet Union. During this era, these so-called “jazz ambassadors” took on the mantle of citizen diplomats, helping to expand the audience for jazz while being portrayed by the US State Department as representatives of a society that valued free expression for all. US officials hoped the love of jazz would be equated with a love of US ideals – in particular the pliable construct of freedom. From its inception, the government’s use of jazz as a form of propaganda was designed to help counter the troubling realities of America’s segregation and racism that were then prevalent, a fact that Soviet propagandists trumpeted throughout the world. Although the intent of enlisting jazz in the fight against communism was one that centered on its propaganda value, the jazz ambassadors, many of them African Americans, shared a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of the ongoing struggles for equality through conversations and interviews in various countries. As a result, jazz became a lens through which people around the world, as well as the jazz ambassadors themselves, could discuss ideas and issues such as equality and freedom of expression. Some of the questions that will be considered in this paper include: how did the Poles and their government view jazz in the post-World War II decade? What did it mean to Poles in 1958 to see and hear Brubeck? Did such tours contribute to improved attitudes toward the US? Finally, how did Poles interpret Brubeck’s so-called West Coast jazz into their own emerging jazz styles? [Fig 1- Photo of DBQ] The sources for this research include archival materials found in the Brubeck Collection at the University of the Pacific, new interviews with Dave

and lola Brubeck, as well as a series of interviews with Polish jazz musicians who interacted with the Dave Brubeck Quartet during the group's 1958 tour of Poland.

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Not long after the end of World War II, jazz in the Eastern bloc found itself targeted for repression. To provide a context for the efforts to suppress jazz in postwar Poland, it is useful to consider how and why the Soviet Union attempted to eliminate jazz and other Western influences from Soviet life. On August 18, 1946, the Soviet government's daily newspaper *Izvestia* attacked the music as an example of perverse Western vulgarity. This was a dramatic change of course for a government that had embraced jazz musicians as a vital part of the Soviet Union's efforts to win the war. Historian S. Kenneth Starr has detailed how the status of jazz in the Soviet Union was transformed from a well-funded government initiative essential to maintaining morale to a maligned and corrupting force seen as a part of what Soviets identified as a sinister plot by the American government to break down local cultural resistance to American imperial expansion. The change happened almost overnight, with no advance warning, as jazz musicians were rounded up and sent to labor camps, saxophonists were forced to trade in their instruments for oboes or clarinets, and dance bands were instructed to avoid playing any music that resembled popular jazz. Satellite nations, such as Poland, were also expected to follow Stalin's dictates and censor any Western-influenced culture, especially jazz, which had flourished briefly immediately after the war in Poland.

Polish saxophonist Jerzy Matuskiewicz recalled that such censorship resulted in the 1948 closure of the YMCAs in many major cities and the destruction of the jazz listening libraries that had been available there. Local police and militia were instructed to stop the playing of jazz music, resulting in a crackdown on those musicians who were playing jazz. As a result, the so-called catacomb era in Polish jazz ensued, from 1948 until

1954, when secretly, jazz musicians and fans would gather in homes to make and appreciate the forbidden fruit of jazz. The name resulted from the fact that these underground sessions were known only to a very small group of individuals, who took the risk to support jazz.

In addition to its broad appeal to Polish youth for its energy, complexity and newness, the music also represented the desire for a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. To Polish jazz musicians, jazz represented ideas of free expression and the excitement of being nonconformist. As was the case in the Soviet Union, Polish jazz proved impossible to control and jazz recordings were smuggled into Poland to be treasured and shared among the growing number of jazz aficionados. One such jazz fan, Helena Zaworska, then a Warsaw doctoral student in literature, gathered with friends to listen to smuggled jazz recordings. She recalled, "Jazz took on the status of myth to us. Listening to jazz, we became free during that hour, which was the only way to feel freedom at that time. Jazz allowed us to dream, to retain some sense of idealism, because we thought the limits on our freedoms might last forever." Poland's disaffected intelligentsia embraced jazz as a tonic to the restrictive policies that limited their access not only to jazz recordings, but also to Western books and films, while prohibiting any international travel.

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By 1954, a new regime had come to power in Poland led by Wladyslaw Gomulka, a former freedom fighter known for his role in the resistance against the Germans, and also as a strong advocate for increasing Poland's independence from Moscow. Under his leadership, the ban on jazz was eased, and by November 1, 1954, the first sanctioned national gathering of Polish jazz musicians was held at the Krakow All Soul's Days Jazz Festival. By 1956, the first Eastern bloc international jazz festival occurred in

Sopot, a sleepy Polish resort town on the Baltic coast, which attracted an unprecedented audience of nearly 30,000 jazz lovers to the weeklong festival. [Fig. 2 – Sopot] Polish jazz had grown to become the first component of the nation's emerging post-war cultural and national identity, while also assuming a certain political significance to the avant-garde. Saxophonist Matuskiewicz, one of the founders of Poland's most popular jazz group of that time the Melomani (Music Lovers), explained that jazz musicians became the first wave of a cultural shift that resulted in greater freedom of expression. "At first we were enamored with jazz for its musical qualities, but over time our activities assumed more and more political implications. We soon were surrounded by those involved in the arts, painters, film makers, writers, playwrights and actors, who thought we would be the first to emerge and break free, after which they could follow us."

The US State Department had recognized the propaganda value of jazz and on January 6, 1955, initiated a nightly jazz broadcast by Willis Conover. For the next 40 years the *Music USA Jazz Hour* opened each evening with the strains of Ellington's iconic "Take the A Train," followed by Conover's mellifluous and precisely enunciated call, "Time for Jazz!" At its peak, an audience estimated at 100 million people heard the *Jazz Hour*. Notably, no pro-American or anti-Soviet propaganda was ever explicitly incorporated into Conover's actual broadcasts. Instead, the *Jazz Hour* was appreciated by listeners for the artistry on display as well as the individualism expressed by its featured performers, many of whom were also interviewed on the show.

The Polish musicians interviewed for this essay frequently cited the *Jazz Hour* as being instrumental in their own Cold War jazz education. Bassist Roman Dylag remembered that, "The only contact we had with contemporary jazz was the hour with Willis Conover. This was our real jazz academy."

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President Dwight Eisenhower astutely realized that winning the Cold War would require that America's culture be exported to demonstrate the nation's ideals. He believed that such an effort could best be realized by enlisting American citizens to speak face-to-face with foreigners about the quality of American life. To achieve this, on September 11, 1956, Eisenhower initiated the "People-to-People" program which provided funding and management for cultural and educational exchanges with a host of countries. One such initiative was the jazz ambassador program, which provided the Dave Brubeck Quartet with the opportunity to become the first contemporary American jazz ensemble to tour an Eastern bloc country, while later giving performances in Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Ceylon, East and West Pakistan and India under the auspices of the State Department, which viewed these as key territories in the struggle with the Soviet Union. [[Fig 3 – Map of tour](#)]

Brubeck's Quartet presented a series of 13 concerts in Poland's largest cities from March 6-18, 1958 and as part of the People-to-People initiative also participated in after-hours jam sessions, informal discussions, shared meals and home visits with various Polish citizens, visited culturally significant sites and did numerous interviews with Polish print and broadcast journalists. [[Fig 4, Brubeck with Poles on the street](#); [Fig 5, dinner with Poles](#), [Fig 6, Jam session at Club Rotondo](#)] By doing so, not only did the Quartet gain a greater understanding of the struggles of the Polish people, but also the Poles came to know and understand the values and ideals of the American musicians.

Brubeck was asked regularly about racial problems in the US. In his first Polish interview, Brubeck had to address the racial inequalities faced by blacks at home. He tackled the question head on, decrying the Jim Crow laws that discriminated against African Americans, while stating that he hoped that the color-blind relationships that jazz

musicians enjoyed amongst themselves would someday become the norm in America. The Quartet knew first hand how prevalent discrimination was back home as it had required a last minute call to the governor to allow the Quartet to play at East Carolina College the night before they departed for their world tour due to a Jim Crow ban of mixed group performances. Poles, however, looked at the Quartet and saw that African American bassist, Eugene Wright, was afforded the same dignity and respect as any other member. Through the microcosm represented by the jazz ambassadors, foreigners could see that race was definitely not a barrier to achievement in jazz.

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The Quartet's Polish concerts were extremely well received. In addition to each being a sell-out, critics proclaimed the Quartet's improvisations as being lively and emotionally powerful beyond anything previously experienced in Poland. Interestingly, jazz appears to have still been viewed negatively by the more traditional classical music hierarchy in Poland, as many critics attempted to explain why Brubeck's music must be considered as true art, in an attempt to elevate the status of jazz to approximate that of classical music. To Polish jazz musicians, the concerts were seen as representing an unprecedented opportunity to listen and learn about jazz from one of the most acclaimed groups of the day. As Polish musicians followed the Quartet from city to city, they discussed musical ideas with the jazz ambassadors and took every opportunity to learn from them. [\[Fig 7 - Photo of Polish musicians with DB at piano.\]](#)

A twelve-page program was published with government approval and features a minimalist line drawing of Brubeck on the cover, immediately recognizable to jazz fans due to his heavy black-rimmed glasses and strong chin. A close reading of the program's biography of Brubeck shows how politics and race were bound up in the "official" recognition of jazz in Poland. The program compared Brubeck's musical training

to that of legendary African American jazz saxophonist, Charlie Parker, and stated that “Parker was a poor black boy born out of [the] American soil, whereas Brubeck was born into a well-to-do family, who with help from his father, could afford access to the best musical studies.” Such commentary, based on the fact that Brubeck was able to afford a conservatory education and graduate studies with Darius Milhaud after the war, demonstrates that although jazz continued to build its audience throughout Poland, it was still an art form intimately bound up with Cold War propaganda. Jazz may have been accepted in Poland, but the party still made the case for capitalism’s inherent inequalities, for example, the state of race relations in America. Nonetheless, the Polish musicians and writers interviewed for this research do not remember such arguments having an impact on their appreciation for Brubeck as both an artist and a jazz ambassador. They were able to appreciate jazz as both a musical style and a symbol of free expression, while acknowledging the fact that blacks faced grave inequalities in America. Such examples serve to remind us that throughout the Cold War era, culture, identity and politics were inextricably connected and such intersections often led to multiple levels of meaning for the people who interacted with the jazz ambassadors.

Near the end of his tour of Poland, Brubeck expressed a newfound understanding of the underlying spirit of the Polish jazz movement, which grew from his repeated People-to-People encounters, and which led him to make an overt political statement in an Eastern-bloc country. In an extensive interview published in the March 17, 1958 edition of the *Worker’s Voice*, Brubeck said, “True, pure jazz can develop best in freedom-loving countries. I consider Poland to be such a nation.” Why wasn’t such a comment censored? While it is clear why such a statement would resonate with Polish jazz community, it caused no known reaction from Polish authorities. That is likely due to the fact that as Polish culture continued to evolve, Brubeck’s statement could also be

construed as an endorsement of the level of freedom found at that time in Poland by its leaders, who from 1954 on had allowed Polish jazz to emerge.

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A great many Polish jazz musicians immediately tried to copy the Quartet's musical style. According to the Polish monthly *Jazz*, Polish jazz groups were soon devoting entire concerts to emulating the Quartet's music. Although leading Polish jazz musicians such Krzysztof Komeda had begun to experiment with styles that approximated the West Coast cool sounds epitomized by Brubeck's Quartet well in advance of his visit, Polish jazz scholar Dionizy Piatkowski suggests that Brubeck's 1958 performances were pivotal events in the evolution of Polish jazz stating, "most of all, there were the modern jazz concerts of the Dave Brubeck Quartet that completely confirmed the direction taken by contemporary jazz in Poland."

One final postscript to the tour further demonstrates the impact of Brubeck's visit, while also pointing to the inherent strength of Eisenhower's People-to-People initiative: its capacity to involve everyday citizens in diplomacy. In an April 6th 1958 interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Brubeck's wife Lola, who had accompanied the Quartet for part of the tour, mentioned the scarcity of jazz recordings and sheet music throughout Poland, which resulted in an outpouring of unsolicited donations from American jazz fans for their Polish counterparts. Soon, Lola had arranged to begin regular shipments of donated jazz materials to Poland, sent in care of the US Embassy's Cultural Attaché, Frank Lewand, who then distributed these materials to the Polish jazz circles found across the country. Here was evidence that on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Eisenhower's People-to-People strategy was effectively creating a connection that transcended the broader political divide between East and West. By October of 1959

Brubeck's effort to facilitate regular distribution of People-to-People donations of jazz music was dubbed the "Jazz-Lift" by the Polish press, as a nod to the famed Berlin Airlift a decade earlier that broke the Soviet's food blockade of West Berlin. [Fig 8 - Brubeck autographing Jazz Lift materials]

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This analysis of the role of cultural diplomacy as reflected in the Brubeck 1958 tour and its particular influence on the emerging jazz movement in Poland reminds us that mixing culture and politics may result in creating multiple levels of meaning to those engaged in such exchanges. By deftly speaking about the realities of life and art in America, the jazz ambassadors helped to facilitate meaningful dialog with a wide range of people across a variety of cultures, leading to a better understanding of the complexities of life back in the US. The jazz ambassadors didn't gloss over the fact that blacks faced segregation at home; instead they decried it and proclaimed their belief that the situation must be improved.

Although one might argue that issues of race, class and poverty continued to be problematic in the US throughout the Cold War era, America's efforts to demonstrate that it could live up to the ideal espoused in the nation's founding document, that all men are created equal, certainly helped the jazz ambassadors wield significant power during the Cold War.

At the same time, jazz has continued to help define Polish culture with many accomplished Polish contemporary jazz artists gaining international acclaim. A number of these artists continue to reference the influence of the Cold War jazz era on the evolution of Polish culture. Jazz organist and head of the Polish Jazz Society, Krzysztof Sadowski summed up the role jazz played in Poland during the Cold War, "It was music,

but it was also political. For those of us who lived through that time, jazz will always be the sound of freedom.” By assuming a broader meaning in the context of Poland’s emerging cultural identity, jazz music and its attendant culture became synonymous with the Polish avant-garde’s desire to express themselves freely.

In conclusion, I suggest that in the case of Poland, the historic 1958 tour by the Dave Brubeck Quartet helped to foster a more nuanced understanding of one another’s cultures that traditional diplomatic efforts would have been unlikely to produce.

For a great many Poles, jazz had indeed come to signify freedom sound.

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