

# Jazz Diplomacy and Its Influence on the United States during the Cold War

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## Abstract:

About the Jazz Diplomacy during the Cold War, related researches are relatively scarce in China. However, there already have some incisive research results. By searching history resources, mostly secondary resources, combining domestic and international researches, this article aims to show a clear picture about the role of Jazz Diplomacy and Its influence on the United States. during the Cold war. Jazz Diplomacy has had an impact on the dissemination of culture and ideology, the shaping of international image, and the domestic civil rights movement in the United States. It was a combination of politics and culture under the Cold War. From the positive perspective, Jazz Diplomacy spread American culture worldwide successfully, and by showing a picture of the harmonious relationship between black and white people, it partly helped the United States clarified its domestic racial problems and built a positive international image. Also, it publicized the idea of freedom and equality overseas. However, the real racial situation in the United States severely hit the fragile image established by the Jazz Diplomacy. This in fact gave the African Americans a chance to take use of accusations faced by the United States and conduct civil rights movements domestically.

**Keywords:** Jazz Diplomacy, Cold War, America.

## 1. Introduction

During the cold war, the United States competed with the Soviet Union in various areas. In terms of diplomacy, to co-opt other countries to stand with the Western Bloc and establish a positive international image, the United States used multiple methods, including Jazz Diplomacy, which means using jazz music as a tool to spread culture and ideology, therefore raising the reputation of the United States. Jazz Diplomacy had brought complicated influence to American in the second half of the 20th century.

This article aims to systematically sort out the role of Jazz Diplomacy during the cold war. This study will be helpful for understanding the power of cultural diplomacy, the development of jazz music and racial situation in the United States during the cold war. Knowing these historical facts maybe useful to get the cultural strategies adopted by current countries and its impact on the international community. By searching, reading and analyzing various historical resources, this article consults the research achievements of domestic and foreign scholars. This kind

of research method can comprehensively demonstrate the position and influence of Jazz Diplomacy during the Cold War, which is beneficial for the progress of the study. To clearly present the landscape of Jazz Diplomacy during the Cold War, this article is divided into several sections. The first section introduces the background of cultural diplomacy. The following section discusses the history and characteristics of jazz music and Jazz Diplomacy. The final section analyzes the influence of Jazz Diplomacy on the dissemination of American culture, the construction of the United States' international image, and the African American Civil Rights Movement.

## 2. Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War

With the publish of Iron Curtain Speech and the introduction of Truman Doctrine, the Cold War officially began. The United States used "freedom" as its external promotional term to compete with the Soviet Union, and dedicated to create a national impression of the leader of the free world. However, the flood of racism had become a crucial domestic problem for the US. The Soviet Union grabbed this crack and used it as a weapon to attack the US, revealing the reality behind the so-called freedom country. The difference between the principles including freedom and equality which the US claimed to the international society and its actual domestic situation had created a negative impact on the international reputation of the United States. With the goal of fighting back the Soviet Union, and clarifying the racism problems to the international communities, the United States conducted a series of diplomatic activities to build a positive international figure, including using culture as a diplomatic tool. Jazz diplomacy during the 1950s to 1980s was one of the most famous and representative cultural diplomatic activities. It had caused various influences to the United States.

## 3. Jazz Music's Position in Cultural Diplomacy

### 3.1 The Characters of Jazz Music

To fully understand the position of jazz music during the cold war, it's important to know the characters of jazz music.

Jazz music was born at New Orleans in the end of 19 century. New Orleans is a gathering place for African Americans. There were some associations established by Black brass band and charity organizations, which goal was helping patient and burying the dead. These associa-

tions performed passionate music on the funeral parade, which was the initial style of jazz music. Most of the first jazz musicians were African Americans, and they were the lower class of society who often play music in vulgar places such as brothel and nightclub. Also, the style of jazz music differed from classical music a lot. Based on the reasons above, jazz music was unwelcomed by white people in America at that time, and had a bad reputation. However, jazz music gradually attracted the attention of young generations who were the rebels of traditional culture, seeking for novelty and excitement. With the migration of African Americans to the northern cities in 1920, the center of jazz music transferred to Chicago [1]. Jazz began to spread across the US, and gained high popularity. Generated by African Americans. Jazz music gradually became a symbol of double identity----Black and American people. African Americans have retained their cultural traditions during the history of slavery. They brought African dances, music, and religious rituals to America [2]. Jazz music was created by absorbing those traditions and combining African Americans' pain and sorrow triggered by the racial discrimination they suffered and the devastation brought by slavery. Jazz showed the spirit of African Americans' identity recognition and their rebelling of injustice. However, with jazz music sweeping across the country, American white people began to interpret jazz in a way which totally different from African American. They viewed jazz as a symbol of freedom because jazz musicians can improvise during music playing, and there was no class limitation for appreciating jazz [3].

It's clear that jazz was an appropriate choice for cultural diplomacy. First, jazz was born in America. Compared to other culture symbols which were transferred from Europe, jazz was more representative for America. Second, Jazz, as a music that originated from black people, was now popular throughout the country. The US can use it as a tool to reflect the racial inclusivity of America [4]. Third, jazz can be interpreted as the symbol of freedom, thus it can be used to advertise American ideology. In conclusion, jazz has the potentiality to help America to build positive international image, clarify the issue of race, and finally attract other countries to confront the Soviet Union.

### 3.2 The Development of Jazz Diplomacy

The development of Jazz Diplomacy can be traced back to a jazz program on "Voice of America" hosted by Willis Conover. This jazz show was considered as the most popular program by international audience [3]. The potentiality of this program had been spotted by American government. During the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. State Department began to send famous jazz musicians appeared

in Willis Conover's jazz show, including Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck and Duke Ellington, to conduct diplomatic tour concert around the world.

In 1956, the U.S. State Department for the first time sent Dizzy Gillespie to lead a delegation to visit Southern Europe, Middle East, Latin America and South Asia, attracting local residents and elites to come and watch. In the early 1960s, musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Dave Brubeck spread jazz to Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. In 1962, Benny Goodman's band toured in the Soviet Union. In 1963, the Birmingham movement exposed sharp racial issues within the United States, leading to condemnation from various countries. To alleviate the crisis of its international image, the U.S. State Department sent Duke Ellington, a worldwide famous black musicians, to conduct tour concert in the Middle East, showing America's determination for solving racial problems.

There wasn't a clear ending time for the Jazz Diplomacy. In 1980s, pure musical interaction with political goals between countries was no longer common, replaced by a series of comprehensive activities that integrate more cultural and artistic forms [5].

## 4. Jazz Diplomacy's Influence on America

### 4.1 Jazz Diplomacy's Cultural Influence

"Voice of America" was an international broadcaster established by the United States government in 1942. Its targeted audience was non-Americans outside the American borders. During the cold war, the United States government used it as a tool to publicize American culture and ideology. "Voice of America" had more than 100 million audiences all over the world during the cold war, and jazz program contributed a large portion of its listening rate [4]. In fact, due to the jazz ambassadors' promotion, countries from the third world, the Western Bloc and even the Eastern Bloc were attracted to jazz music and American culture.

The influence of jazz actually crossed the iron curtain. For the Soviet Union, young people's daily lives have had close connection with jazz music. They brought jazz records, dancing with jazz music in nightclub, drinking and seeking for pleasure. Even people from the communist youth league put up magazines in their dormitory [6]. Furthermore, the Soviet Union gradually developed a jazz music with its own characteristics.

In the third world, jazz also exerted its influence. During Dizzy Gillespie's performances in Arab cities, he successfully infected the audiences' emotion by jazz music.

In Thailand, Benny Goodman played jazz with local musicians, even with the king, which greatly increased people's interest for jazz music. In Africa, since jazz had similarities with African culture, local people had extraordinary enthusiasm to jazz, and even joined the American jazz band to play together [4].

Countries from the Western Bloc like France and Japan were affected by jazz as well. People in the Federal Republic of Germany used jazz as a material to overcome the negative historical images. West Germany even started its own jazz ambassador program [7].

In a nutshell, American culture represented by jazz music had spread to worldwide countries and has had a certain cultural influence. In terms of cultural dissemination, Jazz Diplomacy was surely successful.

### 4.2 Jazz Diplomacy's Influence on American International Image

In a passage which is about jazz music behind the iron curtain, there's a sentence saying "By creating a venue where black artists could discuss their artistic process and the figures they idolize openly, VOA was able to create an image of independence and luxury for black Americans." [6]. This actually shows two essential elements in Jazz Diplomacy. One is race, the other is ideology.

As a music culture generated by African Americans, the initial core of jazz is the spirit of rebelling of their suffered experience caused by racial discrimination and slavery. This wasn't a beneficial background for Jazz Diplomacy, and racial problems were often used by the Soviet Union as a tool to attack the United States [4]. However, the United States solved this problem by redefining the meaning of jazz. In addition to injecting values of freedom into jazz music, the United States tried to show a picture that African Americans can freely create their music like white musicians on a open platform, which reflected the racial inclusivity and the progress of dealing with racial problems of the United States during Jazz Diplomacy. Apart from that, most jazz ambassadors responded the expectations of the United States government, expressing an optimistic attitude towards the United States' current race relations. In 1956, Conover interviewed Billie Holiday, an African American jazz singer. During the interview, she ignored the criticism she faced and talked about her friendship with Benny Goodman, a white jazz musician. The purpose of Holiday was to contradict that American life was racially segregated [6]. Therefore, during their overseas tour, the appearance of racial harmony in jazz bands allowed the foreign audiences to truly feel that racial issues in the United States are not as serious as what was said by the Soviet Union. To some extent, the Jazz

Diplomacy clarified the racial issues in the United States, and helped the United States to build a positive international image [8].

The next point of Jazz Diplomacy is about the ideology. Jazz music itself somehow showed the idea of freedom, since improvisation was the core of jazz performance. Also, there was no limitation for the audience to appreciate jazz, which meant that it can span across various races and classes [4]. The audience often associated the universality of jazz with the idea of democracy and equality, and therefore understood the charm of American culture and ideology. Thus, Jazz Diplomacy achieved its goal of showing the superiority of American way of life and instilling American ideology.

However, Jazz Diplomacy also brought negative impacts to the United States. The biggest drawback of Jazz Diplomacy was that the picture it showed to the international society was far from the real situation in America [9]. Racial problems in the United States were still severe, and with the development of information technology, constant events of racial conflict in the United States such as Little Rock Crisis and the Birmingham campaign rapidly spread to the various countries. The fragile international image built by Jazz Diplomacy immediately broke down. Criticism from other countries had surged toward the U.S. like a flood. Jazz Diplomacy in fact become a weapon which eroded the United States itself. In conclusion, it was clear that the crucial step to improve American international image and compete with the Soviet Union in the area of cultural diplomacy was practically improving the treatment of African Americans. This is also the third impact of Jazz Diplomacy that will be discussed next, which is the promotion of the civil rights movement in the United States.

### 4.3 Jazz Diplomacy's Influence on the African-American Civil Rights Movement

On October 4th, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite in the world, which put pressure on the United States, and accelerated the U.S.-Soviet space race. As for the backward situation of the U.S., the famous jazz ambassador Duke Ellington commented that the United States had not achieved the scientific success of the Soviet Union because racial discrimination had blocked the U.S. from forming the situation of racial harmony that was beneficial for scientific progress [10].

While the U.S. busily sending jazz musicians overseas for diplomacy, domestic racial scandals frequently occurred and dragged the U.S. into an embarrassed situation. As a group of people with double identity, African American jazz ambassadors clearly knew the dilemma their coun-

try was facing [9]. Those African Americans were not only musicians who were responsible for the promotion of American identity, but also the representatives of the black community, which means they would strive for the benefit of black people. Led by jazz ambassadors, the African American society noticed the chance for reform in the predicament of Jazz Diplomacy. They took use of the pressure brought by the cold war and international public opinion and advocated the U.S. to abolish Jim Crow laws, thus completely eliminate racial segregation. African Americans pointed out that only in this way can the U.S. truly enhance the reputation and thus improve its power in the Cold War.

Many jazz musicians spoke openly about the racial paradox inside the United States. Louis Armstrong, the famous jazz ambassador, canceled his official tour to the Soviet Union after the Little Rock Crisis, and attacked his country for racial discrimination [11]. He directly pointed out that "the leader of the free world was committed to democracy only in theory". He even asserted that "the way they treat my people in the South, the government can go to hell", and called President Eisenhower "the two-faced" [12]. Armstrong used Jazz Diplomacy as a tool to protest and fight for the civil rights of his people [12]. Other musicians, like Duke Ellington, had participated in marches, fund-raising events for civil rights organizations [10]. They forced the U.S. government to realize that its interests align with those of the black community. The U.S. government recognized that in order to gain a positive international image and win the cold war, it was unavoidable to reform African American's civil rights. Finally, the government passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial discrimination.

Retracing the Jazz Diplomacy's improvement of the African American Civil Rights Movement, we may find that those African American jazz ambassadors weren't just diplomatic tools controlled by the U.S. government. In fact, they had their own thoughts and eager to grab every chance to improve the lives of African Americans. However, although Jazz Diplomacy promoted the reformation of African American's civil rights, racial discrimination still deeply rooted in the U.S., and will spend a long time to thoroughly wipe it out.

## 5. Conclusion

During the cold war, Jazz Diplomacy played a complicated role. In cultural perspective, Jazz Diplomacy successfully spread American music culture to worldwide countries, which promoted recognition of American culture among people from other countries, and made the United States had the upper hand in the competition with the So-

viet Union in the cultural field. In terms of ideology, Jazz Diplomacy disseminated the idea of freedom, equality and democracy by music, further consolidating the image of the United States as a leader of the free world. However, the racial harmony promoted by jazz music was seriously inconsistent with the real situation of racial discrimination in the United States, which sparked condemnation of the United States by various countries and promoted the domestic Civil Rights Movement led by black people. In a nutshell, Jazz Diplomacy was not only a symbol of native American culture, but also a weapon of ideological confrontation and a political supporter of racial relations. This article provides some references for studying cultural propaganda during the Cold War period, and future research can focus more on the reactions of other countries to the influence of American jazz culture.

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