The Jazz Ambassadors: An episode in the history of the American musical form

Fred Mazelis
14 May 2018

The Jazz Ambassadors, an hour-long film currently available on the US Public Broadcasting network, deals with the period from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s when the US State Department sponsored overseas tours of famous bands led by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and others.

The context was the Cold War between Washington and Moscow. As the movie explains at its outset, US foreign policy officials concluded that "jazz could give America an edge in the Cold War," with leading figures, mostly African-American musicians, "serv[ing] as Cold War cultural ambassadors."

The film is directed by Hugo Berkeley, an award-winning British documentary filmmaker, whose earlier work includes *Land Rush* (2012), on the effort to build a sugar cane business in the West African country of Mali, and *The Market Maker* (2009), about an Ethiopian economist's attempt to fight famine.

Narrated by actor Louis Odom, Jr., *The Jazz Ambassadors*is filled with absorbing musical and historical footage of this period. This is supplemented by interviews with several historians, and also with some of the musicians, recalling their experiences of 50 and 60 years ago.

Between 1956 and 1963 there were five State Department-sponsored jazz tours. Dizzy Gillespie and his band went to Asia, the Middle East, Turkey and Greece in 1956. He was followed by Dave Brubeck in 1958 to Europe and Asia, Louis Armstrong on a 45-day trip to 14 countries in 1960-61, Benny Goodman on an eight-week, six-city tour to the Soviet Union in 1962, and Duke Ellington, on a tour to the Middle East and India that began in the late summer of 1963 and was cut short by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November. Each of these trips is shown in some detail on screen.

A substantial part of the film is made up of fascinating archival and historical excerpts surrounding the tours, and this is indeed its strongest and most appealing element. Every one of the international trips involved racially integrated groups of musicians. Audiences in Africa, the Middle East, Poland and the Soviet Union are shown rapturously responding to the music. The footage includes such numbers as Gillespie's "St. Louis Blues" and "Blues After Dark," Benny Goodman's "Let's Dance," from St. Petersburg on the 1962 tour, Brubeck's band performing "Koto's Song," the Ellington band's "One More Time," in India on the 1963 tour, and the famous classic, "Black and Blue," by Armstrong in the Gold Coast, which was about to become newly-independent Ghana.

There is something seriously confused in the telling of this story, however. Berkeley has said that he is "drawn to stories that don't reinforce our assumptions but that challenge us to see the world anew." But *The Jazz Ambassadors* does not sufficiently challenge assumptions about 1950s politics and diplomacy. It is too willing to accept the conventional account, and this leads to a fundamental error in its narration and story line.

In the opening scenes of the movie, President Dwight Eisenhower is shown delivering his first State of the Union Address to Congress, in early 1953. "There is but one sure way to avoid global war," says Eisenhower, "and that is to win the Cold War."

Another film clip follows almost immediately, of Theodore Streibert, the first head of the US Information Agency. "Throughout the world," he declares, "there is widespread misunderstanding of the United States. The Communists are quick to take advantage of this, in the lies they are spreading about us."

The narrator at one point repeats this, declaring that "the issue of American racial discrimination was taken up by the Soviets and trumpeted enthusiastically around the world." There is an echo here of the current complaint, in different historical circumstances, about Russian "meddling" in US democracy, with the use of social media to encourage protests like those against police murders.

This is a misreading of the Cold War. The Stalinist regime in Moscow undeniably represented a privileged bureaucracy, the antithesis of the egalitarian goals of the Russian Revolution of 1917. But American capitalism used the crimes committed in the name of socialism to advance its own predatory aims, falsely portraying the Cold War as one of "democracy" versus Communism.

The Jazz Ambassadors credits the idea, concocted inside the State Department, that the jazz tours were somehow going to increase admiration for the US, diverting attention from its reactionary foreign policy while convincing the world that the hated system of Jim Crow was being dealt with at home.

This is a view that is refuted by the actual experience that is shown on the screen. The fact that people turned out in great numbers and with great enthusiasm to greet Gillespie, Armstrong and the other musicians was an expression of solidarity with an oppressed section of the US population, not an embrace of the US ruling class. It was a warm welcome to those who had, in the face of segregation and discrimination, made such a powerful cultural contribution. The majority of listeners, especially in the Third

World, easily distinguished between these representatives of American culture and the foreign policy of the US government. One could argue that the musicians were hailed as representatives of the mass civil rights struggle taking place precisely during these years.

This decade included, among many other important episodes, the Montgomery Bus Boycott that began in late 1955, the fight to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, the lunch-counter sit-in movement that began in February 1960, the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the mass protests in Alabama and elsewhere in 1963. August 1963 saw the mass March on Washington.

Several commentators in the film, particularly Nicholas Cull, the British-born historian currently affiliated with the University of Southern California, reinforce a semi-official account of the Cold War. Cull admiringly recounts the story of Democrat Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., one of only two black US Congressmen, convincing Eisenhower that jazz musicians could help improve the US image.

Only toward the end does the film indicate the different outlooks of Powell and such figures as Armstrong and Gillespie. The musicians "didn't think they were demonstrating the superiority of American values, but the power of jazz as a unifier…," says historian Robin D.G. Kelley.

No doubt the jazz greats were motivated by the opportunity to bring their music to new audiences. Many also saw themselves as representing their country. There was, without question, a blurring of the lines between introducing jazz to a world-wide audience and engaging in Cold War propaganda. But, for the most part, the musicians resisted efforts to soft-pedal the role of Jim Crow and the struggle against it. When a pre-tour briefing was suggested, Dizzy Gillespie declared, "I've got 300 years of briefing. I know what they've done to us, and I'm not going to make any excuses."

Some of the interviews with veterans of the tours many decades later are particularly noteworthy. Darius Brubeck, who accompanied his father on tour as an 11-year-old, recalls that Brubeck was a World War II veteran and had seen the enormous suffering brought by Fascism and war. "He wanted to participate in rebuilding. It was not at all a question of Americanizing the world," he says, but of "lifting ourselves out of conflict and poverty."

Charlie Persip, a veteran of the Gillespie tour in 1956 who is now 88 years old, proudly recalls that they were "not going to sugar coat some of the horrors." He explains that "this was all before Martin Luther King," referring to the fact that open racism and legal segregation still held sway in many parts of the country.

Bob Crow, bass player in the Benny Goodman band that toured the USSR in 1962, remembers that "the country looked just like our country, the people looked just like the people in New York." Strongly suggesting a criticism of right-wing anti-communism, he adds that these observations of the Soviet Union were "a little education in political propaganda."

Another important subject touched on by the film is that of cultural exchange itself. This was the heyday, beginning in the late 1950s, of the interchange between East and West. The response the musicians won abroad reflected a genuine enthusiasm for jazz. While the Stalinist bureaucrats reacted nervously to any development they could not easily control, the workers and young people who responded in the USSR, Poland and elsewhere were not proclaiming support for capitalism, but rather admiration for the music and those who performed it.

The Soviet Union was among the most musically sophisticated countries in the world, and a young generation responded warmly to the opportunity to listen to jazz, which was seen as an expression of the cross-fertilization of cultures and a tremendous contribution of America to a global culture.

This cultural exchange was not confined to jazz. American Van Cliburn won the grand prize at the Tchaikovsky piano competition in Moscow in 1957, an event that was widely seen as part of an effort by the Moscow regime, for its own reasons, to undercut the Cold War, not to stoke it.

Nor were the cultural programs one-sided. American music-lovers were discovering musical geniuses like Soviet pianists Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter, and folk dance troupes like the Moiseyev dancers achieved great success on their American tours. In wide sections in the US and Western Europe, the musicians and artists from the Soviet Union were seen as representative of what had been achieved by the Russian Revolution, despite its horrific degeneration under Stalinism.

It is also worth considering why the high-profile jazz tours ended when they did. The civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 did not usher in a period of calm and stability, but just the opposite. Major cities were convulsed by riots, as the class issues of poverty and joblessness came to the fore. The massive escalation of the war in Vietnam made the US government a far more hated symbol of imperialism than when the tours began in the previous decade. The jazz tours had not given the US "an edge" in the Cold War.

The Jazz Ambassadors, in summation, is a well-made but contradictory film. Much of its content tells a valuable story, an absorbing picture of the events of the period. The international appeal of jazz across national and ethnic barriers is a powerful tribute to this American musical contribution to the world.