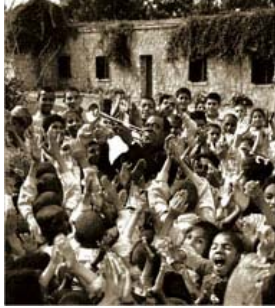


From Jazz Ambassadors to The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad *A History*



“U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell “arranged for [Dizzy] Gillespie, his close friend, to make the State Department’s first goodwill jazz tour, starting out in March 1956 with an 18-piece band and traveling all over southern Europe, the Middle East and south Asia.

The band’s last stop was Athens, where students had recently stoned the local headquarters of the United States Information Service in protest of Washington’s support for Greece’s right-wing dictatorship. Yet many of those same students greeted Gillespie with cheers, lifting him on their shoulders, throwing their jackets in the air and shouting: ‘Dizzy! Dizzy!’”¹

*Louis Armstrong in Cairo in 1961
Credit: Louis Armstrong House Museum*

The Origin

The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad, today produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center in partnership with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, has earned a rich and distinctive standing in American diplomatic history.

The Rhythm Road evolved from Jazz Ambassadors, a program established in 1955 by the U.S. Department of State. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a representative from Harlem, proposed sending some of America’s thriving jazz musicians on world tours through the Jazz Ambassadors program during the Cold War. That year, a *New York Times* headline deemed jazz the country’s “Secret Sonic Weapon.”²

American Greats: First Jazz Ambassadors

March 1956 marked Jazz Ambassadors’ first international tour. Dizzy Gillespie travelled through southern Europe, the Middle East and south Asia with his 18-piece band, greeting awestruck audiences along his path.

In 1956, 1960 and 1961, Louis Armstrong also participated, bringing his celebrated trumpet and distinctive voice to Ghana (then the British Gold Coast), Congo, Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, and the United Arab Republic. In 1963, 1970 and 1972, Duke Ellington toured the Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Dave Brubeck visited 12 Polish cities in 1958—said one onlooker years later to Brubeck, “What you brought to Poland wasn’t just jazz. It was the Grand Canyon, it was the Empire State Building, it was America.”³

Today

The legacy of jazz diplomacy continues today in The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad. Launched in 2005 and produced in partnership with Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, The Rhythm Road has brought 118 musicians from 31 jazz, urban or American roots ensembles to 97 countries to date. In the traditions of Gillespie, Armstrong and Brubeck, The Rhythm Road cultivates cultural exchange and it brings America’s musical art forms to audiences internationally.

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¹ *New York Times*; When Ambassadors Had Rhythm; By Fred Kaplan; June 29, 2008; www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/arts/music/29kapl.html

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.