

The Jazz Scene in America

Frank Kofsky

1966

The men who play the new styles in jazz frequently tell me that they don't like to call their music that—they see nothing desirable in having their art identified with the gin mills, criminal activities, hustling, and ruthless entrepreneurship and exploitation that characterize the jazz scene today. (Or for that matter, yesterday. Haven't black artists always been forced to create in these circumstances?)

I must say I know just what these musicians mean. By now, I'm getting increasingly annoyed at seeing and hearing myself identified as a "jazz critic." To me, a jazz critic is a man like Ira Gitler, Leonard Feather, Martin Williams, Dan Morgenstern, Michael Zwerin, Don DeMichael—a man, in short, who has the presumption to say to a musician who has spent years honing his talent to a fine edge: "The way you are going at the music is wrong. Don't play it that way; play it this way, the way I tell you."

A man would have to be a fool—i.e. a jazz critic—to think himself capable of instructing an artist in how to do or how not to do his art. This is true even in "normal" times; it is a hundred times moreso now, when all of the old rules about the music have been tossed out and the new ones are only incompletely formulated.

That doesn't mean that the intelligent listener—which is what a critic at best ought to be—has to regard the musician as beyond reproach. If a man plays flat without intending it, certainly there's nothing wrong with pointing this out. Or if a particular musician's style doesn't appeal to you, you ought to have the right (and the courage) to say so.

But it's one thing to observe that a man is accidentally not in tune, quite another to demand that he change his entire approach because you happen not to appreciate it. And yet that is just what the self-styled critics of the day are doing. I envy their coolness of nerve (even if I doubt the soundness of their taste).

"The uncommitted people may very well indeed be attracted to the American position by your broadcasts of American (jazz) music."

Those were the words of European pianist Friedrich Gulda to Willis Conover, jazz consultant for the Voice of America, as repeated by the letter to the editor of *Jazz* magazine. "and meanwhile, Conover himself added, "our music helps maintain contact with people already inclined to sympathize with the United States (*Jazz*, September 1965).

If this brief exchange suggests that jazz is utilized by the United States government as an instrument of cold war diplomacy, the suggestion is deliberate. Nonetheless, Conover stoutly denies that his work for the Voice of America amounts to cold war propagandizing. Accused, for example, of employing jazz to counteract the unfavorable world opinion created by the actions of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, Conover's response was to issue an airy disclaimer: the conversation quoted above had taken place "some years ago, before we were in Vietnam' (*Jazz*, Nov. 65).

Even leaving aside the fact that U.S. involvement in Vietnam dates from 1948, when this country began to assume seventy per cent of the cost of France's war to repress the Vietminh, Conover's denial can hardly be taken seriously; this is made clear by an examination of the international role played by his employer, the Voice of America. The VOA is, in Conover's own words, "the radio arm of the United States Information Agency," which, as is well-known, supervises the dissemination of pro-U.S. and anti-socialist propaganda throughout the world. Thus

Kwame Nkrumah, the recently deposed President of Ghana, describes the USIA broadcasts in Africa as: “the chief executor of U.S. psychological warfare,” “glorifying the U.S. while attempting to discredit countries with an independent foreign policy,” and “planning and coordinating its activities in close touch with the Pentagon, CIA and other Cold War agencies, including even armed forces intelligence centers” (*Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, pp. 249–250).

Lest Dr. Nkrumah’s picture of the USIA’s operations be dismissed as exaggerated, consider what the Agency’s Deputy Director, Donald M. Wilson, told the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee. The relationship between the USIA and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is a “very close” one, Wilson assured the Subcommittee members: “We have daily contact with them (CIA and other intelligence agencies) on a number of levels” (quoted by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (Bantam ed.), p. 251). The authors of *The Invisible Government* further state that the VOA acts as “the official voice of the United States Government.” “It should be obvious,” they continue that VOA broadcasts “across national boundaries to other nations, particularly behind the Iron Curtain, are among the mechanisms of United States foreign policy” (*ibid.*, p. 345). All of which disturbs Willis Conover not in the least. “What is wrong,” he wants to know, “with presenting a good music program...?” (*Jazz*, Nov., 1965). What indeed!

Conover’s distortion of the actual functions of his VOA broadcasts can also be seen in the systematic way in which he misrepresents the prevailing social relations in the United States. “My purpose in doing the Voice of America program,” he maintains, is “to show us as we are.” But his views on this country have to be seen in print to be believed. He insists, for example, that “what’s changed is the circumstances most of us live in, changed for the better, and continuing to change for the better.” As evidence, he informs us that now “Sarah Vaughn and I can dance at the White House,” whereas twenty years ago, when “Washington was (emphasis added) a segregated southern town, “we had to go to an illegal uptown after-hours club!” Given this rose-tinted version of life in the United States, it comes as little surprise to hear Conover condemn militant black nationalism as “one of the insanities of racism” (*ibid.*). Who, after all, has any need of black nationalism, when conditions continue automatically “changing for the better?”

It should not be thought, however, that Conover has any monopoly on the use of jazz as a cold war device. On the contrary, it appears to be settled U.S. policy to employ jazz wherever it seems likely to reap propaganda benefits. Thus the jazz magazine *Down Beat* carried a recent article (issue of 10 March 1966) which related, under the heading “Jazz Halts Viet Protest,” that a scheduled demonstration by students at the Lisbon, Portugal, University Medical Faculty against U.S. intervention in Vietnam was “called off...after a concert at the University...by a jazz sextet from the Springfield, a U.S. Sixth Fleet cruiser in Lisbon for a five-day call.”

From Dakar, Senegal, comes a second item making the same point. Again the headline—from a story in the *New York Times*, 31 April 1966—is most enlightening on the way in which Washington perceives the cold war utility of jazz:

“SOVIET POETS FAIL TO CAPTURE DAKAR, Duke Ellington the Winner in Propaganda Skirmish”

The “win” of Ellington’s referred to had taken place at Senegal’s first World Festival of Negro arts; and just to make sure that his readers understood that more was at stake than mere art-for-art’s-sake.

The author, Lloyd Garrison, wrote that Soviet poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko “had been urgently summoned from Moscow to do for Soviet propaganda what Duke Ellington had done for the Americans...”

What makes this exploitation of jazz for cold war purposes all the more reprehensible is the fact that the black artists who have created the music continue to be imprisoned in the chains of third-rate “citizenship” in the U.S. were the *Times* something other than what it is—i.e., a newspaper which faithfully mirrors the views of the ruling class—it might have followed up its account of Duke Ellington’s “triumph” in Dakar by pointing out that the same Ellington had been rejected for a Pulitzer Prize in music less than a year ago. This juxtaposition—not at all atypical, just more glaring than most—exemplifies the unwritten rule that jazz may be eminently serviceable for cold war campaigns abroad, but its leading practitioners are nothing more than “niggers” when it comes to parcelling out the domestic rewards. Jazz courses taught by Negroes are not to be found in University and college catalogs; black jazz musicians do not receive the fellowships, grants, visiting professorships, and other lucrative awards which the cultural Establishment has to bestow; and even invitations to the White House are dispensed on a white supremacy

basis: four whites and two Negroes in the last six years, though upwards of two-thirds of the jazz musicians judged outstanding in various listeners' polls are black.

But there are signs on the horizon that black jazz musicians are no longer content to see their artistry debased into a cold war gambit overseas while it continues to be rejected at home. The popular and widely respected trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie has written in *Fact* magazine that, "The black people are becoming more and more dissatisfied. And if changes don't take place within 10 years, there'll be a revolution." Inasmuch as Gillespie is one of the jazz musicians most often chosen by the State Department to go on tour, words like his must generate certain ominous forebodings in the minds of Washington bureaucrats.

Yet Gillespie's statement appears almost mild compared to some of the sentiments heard from younger and more explicitly radical black jazz musicians. Indeed, the jazz world is still seething from an article by tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp that appeared in *Down Beat* at the close of last year (16 December 1965). Shepp began with a scathing indictment of "these United States, which, in my estimation, is one of the most vicious, racist, social systems in the world—with the possible exceptions of (Southern) Rhodesia, South Africa, and South Vietnam." "For the moment a helpless witness to the bloody massacre of my people on streets that run from Hayneville through Harlem," Shepp confronted his readers with this demand:

"Don't you ever wonder just what my collective rage will... be like if it is—as it inevitably must be—unleashed? Our vindication will be black as the color of suffering is black, as Fidel is black, as Ho Chi Minh is black. It is thus that I offer my right hand across the worlds of suffering to black compatriots everywhere. When they fall victim to war, disease, poverty—all systematically enforced—I fall with them, and I am a yellow skin, and they are black like me or even white. For them and me I offer this prayer, that this 28th year of mine will never again find us all so poor, nor the rapine forces of the world in such sanguinary circumstances."

Here speaks the new black radicalism of this generation's jazz musician. Given this degree of alienation from the status quo and the willingness to articulate it, one suspects that the days of jazz as an instrument in the cold war campaign against socialist revolution are sharply limited. The ruling class may yet discover that as a propaganda weapon, jazz is a sword with two edges.

A further note. An article by M.S. Handler in the *New York Times* for last September 4, "U.S.I.A. Stresses Administration Vietnam Policies," observes that "The United States Information Agency is waging a stubborn struggle in many parts of the world for the Administration's Vietnam policy." Referring to the Voice of America as "the most important instrument of the agency (USIA)," handler writes that the VOA "does not beam its broadcasts to Western Europe," but to "huge audiences for these broadcasts in the developing countries and in the Soviet Union." "Evidence that the agency is indeed reaching the Russian people," according to Handler, "can be found in a letter from Soviet jazz fans. They pleaded with the agency to announce that their 'black market' in records had been moved..."

Cold-war machinations? Hell, no! Just playin' good music, that's all. I wonder how many of the new musicians—say, Marion Brown—would give their assent if they knew that their music was being used to offset the impression of Lyndon's napalm barbecue in Vietnam? For that matter, I wonder if the cats are even getting royalties? And then the Leonard Feathers of this world—there are all too many of them—want to know why the musicians can't quit talking all that talk about exploitation and just get in there and play the blues!

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