

Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War

By Penny M. Von Eschen

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At the height of the ideological antagonism of the Cold War, the U.S. State Department unleashed an unexpected tool in its battle against Communism: jazz. From 1956 through the late 1970s, America dispatched its finest jazz musicians to the far corners of the earth, from Iraq to India, from the Congo to the Soviet Union, in order to win the hearts and minds of the Third World and to counter perceptions of American racism.

Penny Von Eschen escorts us across the globe, backstage and onstage, as Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and other jazz luminaries spread their music and their ideas further than the State Department anticipated. Both in concert and after hours, through political statements and romantic liaisons, these musicians broke through the government's official narrative and gave their audiences an unprecedented vision of the black American experience. In the process, new collaborations developed between Americans and the formerly colonized peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East--collaborations that fostered greater racial pride and solidarity.

Though intended as a color-blind promotion of democracy, this unique Cold War strategy unintentionally demonstrated the essential role of African Americans in U.S. national culture. Through the tales of these tours, Von Eschen captures the fascinating interplay between the efforts of the State Department and the progressive agendas of the artists themselves, as all struggled to redefine a more inclusive and integrated American nation on the world stage.

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Editorial Review

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According to history professor Von Eschen, at a time when the cultural contributions of black Americans were being derided, the U.S. State Department found it useful to send luminaries of jazz music into the world as ambassadors, preceding covert actions in Europe and Africa. In this exploration of the significance of jazz as a propaganda tool during the cold war era, Von Eschen looks at how this phenomenon was reflected in the domestic civil rights movement. Using Louis Armstrong, "Satchmo," as her focus, she recounts privately sponsored international tours that provoked tensions and debates within the State Department. Opponents saw blacks and their creations of jazz and gospel as culturally inferior, while proponents argued that jazz was representative of America at its best and the tours were useful in advancing domestic and overseas agendas.

This book puts fresh light on jazz, Satchmo, and the civil rights era. *Vernon Ford*

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Review

With verve and candor, Penny Von Eschen tells the story of how the U.S. tried to deploy the hot and cool sounds of jazz as a not-so-secret weapon in the Cold War. Little did they realize that the 'jambassadors' would not be the State Department's pawns. Von Eschen captures the tensions between U.S. foreign policy goals and the musicians' imperative to swing, and in so doing has uncovered terrific stories and offered fresh insights into the postwar world. (Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*)

My quartet was one of the first jazz groups to participate in the U.S. State Department's 'people-to-people' program. We understood, of course, that we played a role in Cold War diplomacy, but unfortunately, we were unaware of the part we played in the overall strategy. Penny Von Eschen's book, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, successfully defines that role within the social and historic perspective of U.S. race relations and Cold War policy. (Dave Brubeck, jazz musician and composer)

The experiences playing around the world of Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and other 'jazz ambassadors'--unpredictable, complicated, inspiring, and sometimes hilarious--come alive in Von Eschen's elegantly researched and insightful story. (Thomas Borstelmann, author of *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*)

In this bold and brilliant book, Von Eschen exposes a hidden history of the Cold War while teaching lessons about links between art and politics that have tremendous relevance for the troubled present and the foreboding future. (George Lipsitz, author of *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*)

The U.S. State Department got more than it bargained for when it sent American jazz musicians into international hot spots in the 1950s and '60s. Von Eschen brilliantly portrays artists as intellectuals, activists, and ethnomusicologists who transformed America's efforts to win the Cold War into something much more meaningful. (Krin Gabbard, author of *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*)

Satchmo Blows Up the World provides the first comprehensive look at the 'jazz tours' sponsored by the U.S. government and literally follows them to the ends of the earth. Along the way, Von Eschen provides fascinating insights about them, the collisions of cultural politics and geopolitics, and the vicissitudes and upheavals of race in Cold War America. The history of U.S. diplomacy, jazz music and the civil rights era

will never look quite the same after reading this wonderful book. (Nikhil Pal Singh, author of *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*)

From the mid-1950s through the late 1970s, the U.S. State Department deployed an unlikely tool in the propaganda war against the Soviet Union: federally funded global tours of jazz musicians, especially African American performers. Penny M. Von Eschen's fascinating *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* is both a giddy celebration of an American art form and a disturbing reminder of the challenges of racial politics. (Phil Hall *Hartford Courant* 2004-12-19)

This book fascinates on many levels. Whether for juicy anecdotes or a potted history of jazz in Soviet Russia, where the Americans were amazed by the expertise of fans, this is where to look. (Michael Church *The Independent* 2005-02-01)

This is an important book...It is a revealing look at how jazz and jazz musicians used, and were used by, our government at a time when the music had almost been forgotten in this country. (Thomas Jacobsen *New Orleans Times-Picayune* 2005-02-27)

From 1956 through the late 1970s, the United States government blanketed the far corners of the world with jazz, not in the service of the dollar, but in order to win the hearts and minds of the wrongly committed...Penny Von Eschen's fine study of 'jam-bassadors' and the marooned hipsters who loved them pursues this tension down to its queerest details. (Hua Hsu *The Wire* 2005-04-01)

In *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, Penny M. Von Eschen tells the story of [a] neglected chapter of the Cold War with an acute feeling for the complex motives of all the parties...There is now a small cottage industry of work on the cultural Cold War, typified by...influential conspiracy theories...Containment, hegemony, and imperialism are among the buzzwords of this prosecutorial approach, though their application to complex, ambitious art leaves much to be desired. *Satchmo Blows Up the World* is a valuable corrective to the one-sidedness of these books. Von Eschen does not slight the propaganda value of the jazz tours. But she is alive to the mixed motives of the official sponsors and the varying agendas of the musicians, who were eager for appreciation and stimulated by their encounter with distant cultures. She understands the enthusiasm of far-flung audiences, locked in by their political system or by local elites. She does not see them simply as objects of ideological manipulation. The fans who flocked to these concerts and surreptitiously taped the jazz programmes on the Voice of America were hungry for freedom; they saw jazz as a language of untrammelled self-expression, a fluid, cosmopolitan art bursting with the energies of modernity. In short, the jazz tours took on a life of their own, a musical life, in spite of the Cold War purposes they also served...[*Satchmo Blows Up the World*] avoids most of the perils of Cold War historiography and, at the same time, testifies to a handsome new maturity in jazz scholarship. (Morris Dickstein *London Review of Books* 2005-04-15)

Satchmo Blows Up the World is a fine contribution to the growing literature on the broader contours of cold war cultural politics...The stories [Von Eschen] tells are marvelous and often touching...But what comes across even more strongly in *Satchmo Blows Up the World* is the flagrant paradox of a marginalized people sent abroad to sing the praises of the very country that marginalized them...Perhaps even more than the Americanization of global culture, the enduring legacy of cold war musical diplomacy was the internationalization of jazz. (Brian Morton *The Nation* 2005-06-27)

At the height of the Cold War, the US launched a program that would reach far beyond formal diplomacy: it started sending jazz artists around the world playing America's music. Among the participants were Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, Benny Goodman, Charles Mingus, and Ornette Coleman. They went to every part of the world, including the communist heartland. In this well-written,

detailed account of those 'jazz ambassadors,' Von Eschen shows how the program during its 22 years exceeded any possible expectations anyone could have had. In the first few pages, she discusses the irony of using mostly black jazz artists as symbols of the triumph of American democracy in what was still a Jim Crow nation. While abroad, many of the musicians spoke frankly and honestly about life in America and insisted on reaching out beyond the elite audiences organized for their concerts. The program's political impact was significant at a time when 40 new African and Asian nations were emerging and the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum in the US. Deserv[es] a wide audience. (C. M. Weisenberg *Choice* 2005-06-01)

The prominence of jazz in Cold War-era cultural diplomacy is well known...But Penny M. Von Eschen's book offers the broadest and most in-depth treatment to date, with specific attention to the ironies and contradictions inherent in the U.S. government's promoting African American culture abroad while waffling on racial justice, civil rights, and public funding for the arts at home...Using State Department documents, U.S. and foreign press accounts, and musicians' oral and written reminiscences, she has written an engrossing narrative about how jazz musicians experienced and (re)configured their roles as cultural ambassadors, while addressing multiple overlapping themes about race, representation, aesthetics, activism, and the possibilities of musical diplomacy. (E. Taylor Atkins *American Historical Review*)

Penny M. Von Eschen's account of jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong ("Satchmo") as a cultural envoy is a sophisticated and insightful study of this process of interpretation and reinvention. It is, furthermore, an examination of how Armstrong and others resisted the commodification of their music and distortion of its meaning...The best scholarship is multifaceted, and this work is no exception. The book is sure to provide a lively point of entry for students into the area of cultural diplomacy, and it will also attract anyone interested in jazz, US studies, and cultural history generally. (Brenda Gayle Plummer *International History Review*)

In her fascinating and meticulously researched study of official involvement in overseas tours by leading American jazz musicians during the Cold War, Penny M. Von Eschen vividly and sometimes mercilessly exposes the essentially two-faced nature of the Government's attitude towards the music. At the same time, she sheds much light on individual musicians' attitudes towards their Government and towards the ideals it strove to promote in the international cultural and political arenas in the period c.1956-78. Exemplary in the wide range of source material from which it efficiently draws (including official papers and other archival sources, and personal interviews featuring the first-hand testimony of leading musicians caught up in the events--notably Dave and Iola Brubeck), her account deftly draws on a huge range of supporting literature relating to US politics, culture, and foreign policy. The text is consistently readable, informative, and sometimes entertaining, and likely to appeal as much to the general reader as to the specialist in either jazz or US international affairs. (Mervyn Cooke *Music & Letters*)

A fascinating account of how the U.S. State department tried to win the Cold War by appealing to hearts, minds and souls around the world through its great jazz musicians. And, since most of the musicians were black (Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington), to create the impression of a country where racism was not an issue. (Martin Levin *Globe and Mail* 2006-10-21)

Review

With verve and candor, Penny Von Eschen tells the story of how the U.S. tried to deploy the hot and cool sounds of jazz as a not-so-secret weapon in the Cold War. Little did they realize that the 'jambassadors' would not be the State Department's pawns. Von Eschen captures the tensions between U.S. foreign policy goals and the musicians' imperative to swing, and in so doing has uncovered terrific stories and offered fresh insights into the postwar world. (Robin D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*)

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