

## UCV Global Citizen Platform: The Transformative Power of JAZZ

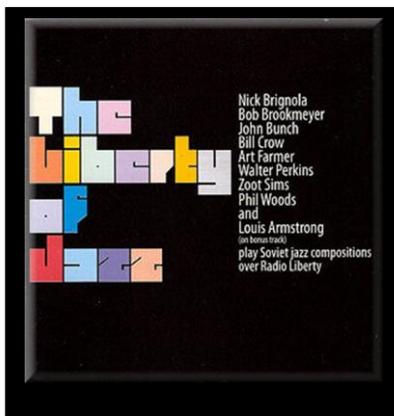
When a US blighted by racial unrest found itself needing to win a global propaganda war, a team of musicians was assembled and sent overseas by the US State Department as ‘Ambassadors of Jazz’.



Jazz pianist, composer and broadcaster Julian Joseph recounts how, between 1954 and 1968, these [‘Jazz Ambassadors of the Cold War’](#) performed unlikely concerts in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Congo, Yugoslavia and The Soviet Union.

While the US State Department usually sent jazz musicians to play for non-white audiences in Asia and Africa, they also sent them behind the iron curtain. Remarkably, just six months before the Cuban missile crisis unravelled in 1962, Benny Goodman toured the Soviet Union and played a concert attended by the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Khrushchev unexpectedly came to a garden party at the U.S. Ambassador's residence on July 4, 1962 (American Day of Independence). He is shown shaking hands with Benny Goodman. Source: Yale University Library [The Benny Goodman Papers](#): Selected Photographs.



### **THE LIBERTY OF JAZZ for RADIO LIBERTY: Bill Crow-Phil Woods All Stars (octet) Play Soviet Originals**

The recordings of Russian compositions were “brought back” to the United States by musicians who were part of Benny Goodman’s orchestra.

*The Liberty of Jazz* for Radio Liberty RKO 131542 - a single-sided, promotional pressing - was recorded at RKO Sound Studios New York city in May 1963 for broadcast to the Soviet Union.

The Solyd CD includes a bonus track of Louis Armstrong soloing on trumpet over a recording of the Russian song “Five Minutes.” The Fresh Sound CD includes an interview with Phil Woods. Special thanks to Bill Crow musician, author narrator and keeper of the [anecdotes](#) for his insight.

## The Jazz Ambassadors and the Civil Rights Movement: intersections and cross-currents

The result of the Ambassador's tours was anything but straightforward for the musicians who participated.

When *Dizzy Gillespie*, America's first jazz ambassador, was asked by the State Department to come in for a pre-tour briefing, he reportedly responded with characteristic swagger: *"I've had 300 years of briefing. I know what they've done to us."* He went on to explain: *"I sort've liked the idea of representing America, but I wasn't going over there to apologise for the racist policies of America."* Dizzy, like all the jazz musicians who would tour on behalf of the State Department, was torn between the feelings of patriotism and his progressive politics, of hoping that America would win the cold war, and wishing that his country would actually embrace its founding ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.

In September 1957, outraged by Eisenhower's refusal to send troops into Little Rock to guarantee the safety of nine black children attempting to enrol in the local high school, *Louis Armstrong* cancelled his trip to the Soviet Union, saying he wouldn't defend the US constitution abroad if it wasn't properly enforced at home.



In 1953 *Ella Fitzgerald* made the cover of *Der Spiegel* in Germany. Photo by [Susanne Schapowalow](#)

Coming off a series of international concert tours and the success of her 1960 live album "Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife," - after being embraced by overseas audiences - Fitzgerald returned home to the U.S. and was reminded of the prevalent racism she and other Black musicians encountered in the South. At the height of the civil rights movement, she sat down for an interview with her friend Fred Robbins, a popular New York radio host. The interview was never aired.

*Maybe I'm stepping out (of line), but I have to say it, because it's in my heart,"* Fitzgerald says. *"It makes you feel so bad to think we can't go down through certain parts of the South and give a concert like we do overseas, and have everybody just come to hear the music and enjoy the music because of the prejudice thing that's going on..."*

*You've got to try and convince the younger ones, they're the ones who've got to make the future and those are the ones we've got to worry about. Not those die-hards,,,*

*I really ran my mouth. Is it going down South? You think they're going to break my records up when they hear it? This is unusual for me but I'm so happy that you had me, because instead of singing for a change, I got a chance to get a few things off my chest. I'm just a human being.*

[The Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation](#) was created and funded in 1993 by the First Lady of Song, in order to fulfil her desires to use the fruits of her success to help people of all races, cultures and beliefs. Ella hoped to make their lives more rewarding, and she wanted to foster a love of reading, as well as a love of music. In addition, she hoped to provide assistance to the at-risk and disadvantaged members of our communities - assistance that would enable them to achieve a better quality of life.

## The Lasting Importance of JAZZ Protest Songs [A Video Essay by Madison Daley](#)



### *Strange Fruit* by Abel Meeropol interpreted by Billie Holiday

In 1936, Abel Meeropol, a Jewish American public high school teacher in New York City came across a [photograph of the lynching of two Black teenagers, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith](#). He penned the poem *Bitter Fruit* reflecting his horror at the scene. It was set to music by [Meeropol](#) and performed several times at protest rallies with [Laura Duncan](#).

Her performance at Madison Square Garden helped bring the song to the notice of Billie Holiday, who later recorded it as *Strange Fruit* – the rest is history.

In October 1939, a music critic for the New York Post wrote: "**If the anger of the exploited ever mounts high enough in the South, it now has its Marseillaise.**" The song's reception among Black Americans at the time was mixed. Some felt it reinforced an idea of Black people as victims, while others praised it for

exposing the horrors of lynching. Holiday's performances placed a previously taboo topic before American audiences at a time when lynchings in the US had begun to rise again.

**Keeping history alive for this and the next generation.** [Lady Day: A Billie Holiday Documentary](#) a high school history project by Mr. Kevorkian, Rena Ho and Steven Salinas *made purely for educational purposes.*



### UK Jazz Renaissance: Race relations, identity. Protest or radicalization ?

The London jazz scene, which is enjoying its greatest creative renaissance since the breakthroughs of Joe Harriott and Evan Parker in the 1960s, is spearheaded by acts trained by grassroots organisations such as London's Tomorrow's Warriors, rather than at fee-paying conservatoires. This new set of artists, the likes of drummer Moses Boyd and keys player Joe Armon-Jones, have enticed a younger audience, with improvised music that takes in the multicultural influences of their diverse heritage as much as swing tradition.

**Shabaka Hutchings** who has established himself as a central figure, feels a responsibility to create music that can inspire those in the Black Lives Matter movement. [On the radical power of jazz: History needs to be set alight!](#)