POP IN THE BLOC:
HOW POPULAR MUSIC HELPED THE UNITED STATES WIN THE COLD WAR

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This thesis examines how the United States used popular music as propaganda to help win the Cold War. Propaganda can best be described as something that makes someone do what they would not do in propaganda’s absence. This thesis first examines the history of propaganda used by the American government in the past and how this led to the decision by U.S. officials to utilize popular music during the Cold War period. Next, the thesis focuses on the role of jazz in penetrating the Iron Curtain, including radio programs, such as Willis Conover’s Music USA and the State Department’s officially sponsored jazz tours. Third, the thesis will examine other popular music, mainly rock and roll, and the effect it had on the Soviet bloc. This thesis analyzes how popular music helped permeate the Iron Curtain and ultimately played a large role in bringing it down and ending the Cold War. A chronology of the events covered in this thesis is located in the appendix to serve as a guide to the reader.

The Cold War, the decades-long ideological battle between the United States and Soviet Union, was fought more in the realm of perceptions than on the battlefield. Therefore, the U.S. government’s decision to use propaganda during this conflict was an important element in the struggle. Americans employed propaganda reluctantly, but realized it was a valuable diplomatic tool. The United States had to demonstrate to the
Soviets the values of the American system, which are based on the dignity of and the freedom of the individual. Since U.S. officials were aware that overly aggressive propaganda could backfire and that there was a generally negative view of propaganda due to its association with totalitarian regimes, the government realized that it could not use overly aggressive, hardcore messages. It needed to be subtle about the messaging, so it chose the evolutionary concept of gradual cultural infiltration.

The U.S. government employed jazz and rock and roll music to illustrate the positive sides of American culture to Communist countries because they were American-born forms of art, and their universal appeal made them well-suited for the mission. Soviet officials were unable to keep up with their citizens’ desire for American culture flowing in from the West.

To present a well-rounded perspective on the aforementioned subject, this thesis relies on a range of books, scholarly work, news articles and firsthand accounts of contemporaries. The thesis finds that music was a critical cultural tool used by the U.S. government to gradually disseminate the American way of life into the hearts and minds of Soviet citizens. Cultural exchanges—particularly those made by musicians to the bloc—brought a breath of fresh air to the USSR. The music created a bridge that allowed those behind the Iron Curtain to escape and it allowed them to hope that one day the Wall would come down, and that they too could live in a free, democratic country. The music bonded Soviet fans to their American peers creating a collective identity where they were one entity. The American tactic of gradual and gentle cultural infiltration eventually resulted in people crossing the bridge and bringing down the Iron Curtain.
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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States government decided on a policy of containment. This meant that it wished to limit the power of the Soviet Union and stop Communism from spreading over the world. The USSR already had significant control over Eastern Europe—creating an “Iron Curtain” across the continent. Thus, the United States needed to devise policies to keep allies and neutral countries from turning Communist. It also had to influence the Soviet Union without risking an open military conflict that could lead to nuclear war. Communist officials did not hesitate to spread anti-American propaganda. However, conscious of nefarious Nazi propaganda during World War II, the U.S. government realized that it could not exclusively use crude propaganda in its struggle with the Soviet Union, and therefore needed to find a compromise that was palatable to both the American people and the world. In order to influence citizens in the Soviet bloc, the U.S. government needed to be subtle about its messaging. This led American officials to choose the evolutionary concept of gradual cultural infiltration and cultural exchanges.

But what is American culture? And how was the government going to prove the value and importance of American culture and thereby demonstrate the major achievements to the American way of life to the world? Government officials recognized the power of music as a universal language and realized that American music could possibly have a significant influence on its listeners overseas. However, the U.S. government perceived Europeans and Soviets to be superior when it came to classical music and thus wanted to offer forms of musical entertainment that was
quintessentially American. And what music was inherently American? Jazz and rock and roll music.

**Hypothesis: Popular Music Helped Win the Cold War**

Spreading jazz music worldwide became the launching pad for American culture influencing the Soviet bloc. Voice of America (VOA) featured music programs, including the highly popular Music USA hosted by the legendary emcee Willis Conover. The State Department-sponsored concert tours of American jazz artists. Even without U.S. government funding, many Western musical groups were eventually allowed to perform in the USSR. The cultural cracks that jazz caused in the Iron Curtain allowed rock and roll music, another American art form, to slip through. Soviet citizens felt that this music embodied freedom and latched onto it. They listened to it secretly on the radio, illegally copied musical records, sold criminal recordings on the black market and formed underground jazz and rock bands. Soviet officials were unable to keep up with the flow of American music—and therefore American culture—filtering into the bloc. Soon they found that they were following their citizens rather than leading them by co-opting jazz clubs and discos where Soviet people could play, listen to and dance to American music. Soviet citizens soon wanted to not only listen to the music they loved, but also to be free to imitate their idols and peers in the West. They wore American blue jeans, cut their hair in “mop-tops” and sometimes even adopted Western names. Before officials in the USSR fully realized it Lennon—not Lenin—was an idol of their citizens.

Music was a critical cultural tool used in the gradual dissemination of the American way of life into the minds of the Soviet Union. Cultural exchanges, such as
visits by American music artists, brought a breath of fresh air to the USSR. Although
the United States also sponsored classical music concerts overseas, popular music, such
as jazz and rock and roll, was particularly important because they were American-born
art forms.

In order to validate the aforementioned hypothesis that the U.S. was successful
in using popular music as soft propaganda to win the Cold War, I organize this thesis as
follows. First, I begin with a brief history of the American use of propaganda prior to
the Cold War, and how U.S. officials decided to use popular music during the Cold War
period. Next, I focus on the role of jazz in penetrating the Iron Curtain, including radio
programs, such as Willis Conover’s Music USA and the State Department’s officially
sponsored jazz tours—also known as jazz diplomacy. I then examine other popular
music, mainly rock and roll, and the effect it had on the Soviet bloc. I analyze how
popular music helped permeate the Iron Curtain and ultimately played a large role in
bringing it down and ending the Cold War.
CHAPTER I

AMERICAN PROPAGANDA

When you are persuaded by something, you don’t think it is propaganda.

– Lee D. Ross¹

Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or—if you really want to be blunt—propaganda.

– Richard Holbrooke²

History of American Propaganda

Some form of propaganda has always existed in the world. Propaganda can best be described as something that makes someone do what they would not do in propaganda’s absence.³ The use of propaganda in the United States can be traced back as far back as the Declaration of Independence. The Founding Fathers wrote not only to declare the independence of the thirteen colonies but also to appeal for help from potential allies. To illustrate, the document appealed to the French, who in addition to


being historically at odds with England, also had their own revolution brewing, and thus garnered their support.  

Propaganda took on its modern form in the twentieth century. World War I is credited with being the time period during which the U.S. government actively began using propaganda in its foreign relations. President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in 1917. Agents were placed all over Europe to educate people about the war in order to gain and keep allies. For example, in Switzerland, CPI agent Vira Whitehouse sent articles to various news publications to promote America and the war effort. CPI also established American reading rooms in cities abroad where people could read American and other English-language materials.

In between the World Wars there was a rejection of the use of propaganda in the United States due to its association with totalitarian regimes and the concern that it was an attempt at mind control. The short-lived anti-propaganda Institute for Propaganda Analysis was formed in 1937 to warn people on what it deemed to be the dangers of propaganda. It had honorable intentions but did not have a far reach or the resources to last longer than 1942.

The State Department created the Division of Cultural Relations in 1938 specifically to increase cultural contacts with Latin America and to insulate the region culturally from the rise of fascism stemming from Germany and Italy.  

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt named Nelson Rockefeller as the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), an agency that was charged with radio broadcasting to Central and South America. The following year, Robert Sherwood, a playwright and speechwriter for President Roosevelt, was named director of the new Foreign Information Service (FIS), which originally was part of the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI), Voice of America’s first parent organization.\(^6\) VOA first went on the air on February 25, 1942.\(^7\) Doug Boyd, an international broadcasting specialist, has cited four reasons that nations broadcast to other nations: “(1) to enhance national prestige, (2) to promote national interests, (3) to attempt religious or political indoctrination, and (4) to foster cultural ties.”\(^8\)

Even before America entered World War II, the COI conducted both open and covert information activities. Colonel William “Wild Bill” Donovan, a World War I veteran, was heading the COI in Washington, and wanted to maintain some overt operations, including VOA. However, the Roosevelt Administration decided to separate the two functions.\(^9\) President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1942 to produce propaganda for the war effort. OWI found itself in a tough position from the beginning because Americans were wary about propaganda falsehoods and atrocity stories that circulated during the First World War. Nevertheless, Roosevelt


\(^{7}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 40.
recognized that U.S. citizens and the country’s allies had the right to be informed about the true nature of the war. Thus, he instructed OWI to disperse information through press, radio, film and other programs to facilitate understanding, both at home and abroad, about the status and progress of the war and the aims of the American government. VOA became part of OWI in the summer of 1942. As far as radio broadcasts were concerned, the relatively inexperienced American staff took advice from the British. Occasionally, VOA broadcasts were screened before they were relayed from British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) facilities in London. To fill in the blanks if BBC decided to delete a program, it would occasionally play American popular music.  

Less than a month after the end of World War II, in August 1945, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9608 that abolished OWI. However, he still felt that information activities abroad were “an integral part of the conduct of our foreign affairs.” He placed part of the information activities in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), under the jurisdiction of the Interim International Information Service (IIIS), in the State Department. This put VOA in the State Department temporarily, and there were serious doubts about whether it would survive there. Truman declared that the new information program sought to present “a fair and full picture of American life and of the aims and policies of the United States government.”  

William Benton, an advertising executive and dynamic

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10 Ibid., 41.

businessman, was named secretary of state for public affairs, barely two weeks after the end of the war, and began implementing these new objectives. He convinced State Department leadership to keep the overseas information program functioning. In October of 1945, Benton testified before a skeptical House Foreign Affairs Committee on behalf of legislation to authorize international information and cultural activities. Concerned about the use of propaganda that could be imposed upon American citizens, Congress was reluctant to fund any overseas information and cultural programs. Benton conceded that such programs could not entirely prevent misperceptions about America, but the U.S. government could at least make an attempt to minimize fallacies. To ensure that foreign peoples had an accurate view of the United States, Benton declared that cultural relations were a crucial element of U.S. international policy. Benton was in an uphill battle with Congress until, in late 1946, Winston Churchill declared that an Iron Curtain had descended across Europe. This prompted Congress to agree to fund information and cultural programs abroad, thus changing the tone of foreign relations for the next several decades.

12 Ibid., 45.
13 Ibid., 46-47.
Use Culture for Containment

When the United States and the Soviet Union were allies during World War II, Premier Joseph Stalin opened Soviet borders to Lend-Lease aid, as well as to American music, films, printed materials and tourists. American musical scores circulated by OWI were particularly popular in the Soviet Union. American music played by Moscow’s jazz orchestras remained popular amongst citizens for generations. Film also became a popular medium for transmitting American culture in the USSR. The State Department began circulating Amerika, a magazine featuring reprints of articles from U.S. publications, in 1944. However, after the war, the Kremlin became concerned about the impact of massive exposure to Western culture and soon launched a campaign to purge the USSR of foreign influence. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Soviet propaganda targeted jazz, films, artists and writers from the West.

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945 the U.S. government was almost instantly faced with threats of Communism and anti-Americanism, and thus began to embark on its Cold War propaganda offensive, paired with its policy of containment. This meant that it wished to stop Communism, which America viewed as “a threat to the survival of all free peoples,” from spreading over the world, and to limit

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14 The Lend-Lease program began in 1941 prior to the U.S. entrance in World War II. The program allowed the United States to send supplies to countries the U.S. government deemed vital to national security.


16 Ibid., 7.

17 Belmonte, Selling the American Way, 4.
the power of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the United States needed to devise policies to keep allies and neutral countries from turning Communist.\(^\text{18}\) American Cold War propagandists sought to put forth a symbolic image of America, which was consciously designed to essentially boast to the rest of the world about how the way of life in the United States was superior to life in the Soviet bloc and other Communist countries.\(^\text{19}\)

American diplomat George Kennan’s 1946 Long Telegram, his 1947 X article “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” the Truman Doctrine and National Security Council Paper 68, all suggested using culture to prevent the expansion of Communism. Kennan argued that the United States could employ nonmilitary tactics and NSC 68 urged utilizing all “means short of war” to contain Soviet expansion. He viewed the Soviets as a dangerous adversary because of what he saw as the “instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,” and he said that Soviet leaders denounced “bourgeois nations” because they felt it strengthened their claims of “capitalist encirclement.” Kennan believed that rather than attempting to placate the Soviets, the United States should challenge and contain Communist expansionism. He viewed propaganda and information activities as fundamental tools in this struggle. Kennan knew that the Soviet government would try to limit cultural interactions with Americans, but still concluded that it was important to explain the United States to foreign audiences. He said, “We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of the sort of world we would like to see than we have put forth in the past. It is not enough to urge

\(^{18}\) Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy*, 7.

\(^{19}\) Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*, 6.
people to develop political processes similar to our own.” President Truman was ready to brand the Soviets as an enemy and, therefore, his administration welcomed Kennan’s remarks. The positive response energized Benton; he appeared before the House Appropriations Committee and testified that the information program was essential to world peace. Thus, with the dedication and hard work of George Kennan and William Benton to garner adequate funding from Congress to execute their plans, culture became a component of American foreign policy. Due to constraints when trying to permeate the Iron Curtain, the U.S. government found that using cultural programs as opposed to hard propaganda could bring positive results. Though at first Washington sought the use of psychological warfare to destabilize the Soviet and Eastern European Communist Party regimes, the slower, evolutionary approach was found to be far more effective, thus gradually infiltrating the Soviet bloc with American culture.

The Smith-Mundt Act

The United States’ containment policy began to characterize American political thought in 1947 leading to the disappearance of the “distinction between politics and ideas” in cultural policy. Congress was increasingly convinced that public diplomacy was an important element of foreign policy. Communists had already begun to use

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20 Ibid., 15.
21 Ibid., 16.
22 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 5.
23 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, ix.
24 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 14.
“words, pictures and ideas, in addition to military force and economic weapons—and exploit modern means and techniques of communication, to advance their objectives.”

A joint congressional committee headed by Senator H. Alexander Smith of New Jersey and Representative Karl Mundt of South Dakota visited twenty-two countries, many in Europe, in the fall of 1947. They returned home determined to energize America’s international information program and also emphasize the Fulbright educational exchange program, which was established in 1946. Bipartisan cooperation in Congress led to the passage of the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act or Smith-Mundt Act in January 1948 and was promptly signed into law by President Truman. The Smith-Mundt Act specified the terms under which the United States government could engage in what came to be known as public diplomacy and aimed “to promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations.” The goal of the legislation was to use all the modern tools of communications, including print, radio, film, exchange programs and exhibitions, to broadcast information about the United States abroad. With the passage of the Smith-Mundt Act, the once-waning U.S. efforts were


26 Heil, Voice of America, 47.

27 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 8.

revived and a foundation was established for efforts to promote propaganda and culture abroad.  

**VOA and Amerika Magazine**

William Benton is credited with saving Voice of America from extinction after it was placed temporarily within the State Department by President Truman after his decision to eliminate OWI. In addition to Benton’s efforts, W. Averell Harriman, U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, advocated for VOA to broadcast directly to the Soviet Union. Harriman reasoned that radio was the only way to reach people isolated by illiteracy, geography and political censorship. VOA’s Russian Service was launched on February 17, 1947 to counter Radio Moscow’s attacks on the United States and the West.

By the mid-1950s, programming on VOA increasingly focused on “the weaknesses and evils of imperialistic Communism.” The State Department did an internal analysis of radio programming in the fall of 1950 that emphasized the extent to which VOA had become almost exclusively a Cold War tool. The study concluded: “There is hardly an item that does not directly and explicitly bear on our Cold War strategy.” The programming on VOA emphasized the virtues of democracy, as well as its eventual triumph. The USSR was portrayed as “the scheming villain . . . all black

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29 Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 11.


32 Heil, *Voice of America*, 47.
“and sinister” whereas America “stands up against the posers of evil with unyielding determination and fierce goal-consciousness.” The analysis found the anti-Communist tone of VOA programming had become so intense a fear that listeners might begin to suffer from “propaganda fatigue” developed. It stated: “The audience is exposed to an uninterrupted succession of purposeful messages without ever having the opportunity of a breathing space. It is an all-out offensive.”33 This resulted in U.S. policy shifting towards the evolutionary approach to propaganda, including the emphasis on straight news and information programs, cultural exhibitions and exchanges. By the late Eisenhower years, U.S. officials began to realize that Voice of America jazz programs and the “polite propaganda” of Amerika magazine would garner better results than blatantly attacking the Soviets and thus began to make progress.34

Those working at VOA knew early on that music is a universal language and that American music could have a powerful effect on listeners overseas. Bess Lomax, one of VOA’s first directors of music, said in 1945:

An especially interesting bit of testimony has come to us from the leader of a group of Frenchmen who had been smuggling allied fliers out of France. While listening to the radio on a ship carrying him to the United States, he heard Yankee Doodle. He jumped up and said: “That is the song that kept us alive during the occupation. That was the one radio voice that we could always trust, and that we listened to faithfully.”35

Throughout the years, VOA has broadcast a variety of American music (and in some regions, native songs and ballads) to eager listeners around the world. The best-known

33 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 38.

34 Ibid., xiv.

35 Heil, Voice of America, 288.
effort was centered on jazz, which will be discussed further in Chapter II. In the twentieth century, jazz was celebrated as the “music of freedom,” and this fact was not lost on American policymakers during the Cold War.

Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL) were two other U.S.-sponsored broadcast services, which were created in the early 1950s. These so-called surrogate stations brought local news to information-deprived listeners behind the Iron Curtain.  

Psychological warfare utilized by the United States had certainly created some turbulence in the East, but had yet to deliver liberation to the people trapped behind the Iron Curtain.  

NSC 114/2, in October 1951, endorsed an agenda of psychological warfare, which would include efforts to promote the “ultimate liberation and identification with the free world” of the Soviet bloc. It advocated strengthening VOA, a measure that would include additional equipment for transmitting and preventing jamming. NSC 114/2 also called for a stronger effort in press and publications, motion

36 Ibid., 289.

37 Snyder, Warriors of Disinformation, 16.

38 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, xiv.

39 Jamming is the “deliberate and intentional interference with a radio station on the same frequency, either in the form of another broadcast or by placing sophisticated noises on the frequency which not only block out reception of the intended broadcast, but also create a psychological condition where it’s impossible to listen”; Heil, Voice of America, 112.
pictures, libraries and information centers, educational and other programs and directed projects in special areas.\textsuperscript{40}

An hour on VOA in the early 1950s typically began with world news, followed by a feature story, a commentary and an interview, music and a special program, then a return to news at the top of the hour. VOA had programming for everybody; even those listeners who were irritated by its anti-Communist propaganda could still enjoy the newscast, feature stories and music, which were all forms of cultural influence. The straight news and features presented on VOA assumed “that people constantly exposed to Communist polemics welcome factual reporting.” \textsuperscript{41} In order to alleviate some of the harshness of its attacks on Soviet society and foreign policy, VOA interspersed music and entertainment programs into the schedule.\textsuperscript{42}

Soviet intellectuals were the most likely to have access to shortwave radios and to listen to and be influenced by Western propaganda, and were therefore the target of VOA. The government commissioned a study at Harvard University that advised VOA to appeal to the intelligentsia of the Soviet Union—professionals, technicians, writers and artists in major Soviet cities. The Kremlin also sought the attention of the intelligentsia with its own propaganda, which it placed in publications read predominantly by that segment of the population.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, 18.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 38-39.
In an ongoing effort to make an effective channel for direct communication with Soviet citizens, American diplomats analyzed the content of VOA programs and anticipated the impact. The VOA approach, as recommended by the Harvard study, was simply to create doubt about the Soviet regime and foster already existing pro-Western views amongst as many Soviet citizens as possible. The underlying theme of VOA programming drove home the suggestion that the hardships endured by the hardworking and long-suffering Soviet people should have earned them a better life. VOA sought to emphasize the difference between the realities of life under the Soviet regime with how life could flourish without it.\textsuperscript{44}

With the technology people enjoy today, it is hard to appreciate the value of VOA’s effort to “get it straight and get in there.” News and information was a precious commodity for people who were denied it. Richard W. Carlson, VOA director from 1985 to 1990 recalled the following about VOA programs to the USSR in the 1960s:

Dr. Yelena Bonner, wife of dissident Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov, told me she and her husband would sit in Gorky Park with their portable radio and a note pad, and listen to the news. They would switch shortwave frequencies and write down phrases, getting bits and pieces because they were so heavily jammed. Then they would listen to rebroadcasts later that night and fit all the pieces together to learn what was happening. People used to the sea of information in the United States are hard-pressed to understand the efforts that are made to imprison a mind, and how thoroughly remarkable the human spirit is in its effort to keep that mind out of prison and free to get information.\textsuperscript{45}

As stated previously, \textit{Amerika} magazine was the State Department’s magazine, and it was modeled on the U.S. publication, \textit{Life}. It was printed in several Eastern

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{45} Heil, \textit{Voice of America}, 126.
European languages, including Russian and Polish. It contained no advertisements or editorials, but instead was packed with glitzy photographs of American life. As an example of a typical copy, the October 1945 issue featured pictures of city skyscrapers, beautiful suburban homes, stylish women’s clothing, cargo ships, penicillin—even cattle ranches. Soviet readers eagerly and anxiously consumed the magazines and then passed them around to one another—sometimes until the pages disintegrated. Kennan, U.S. chargé d’affaires in the Soviet Union at the time, said, “A picture spread of an average American school, a small town, or even an average American kitchen dramatizes to Soviet readers . . . that we have . . . a superior standard of living and culture.”

By Eisenhower’s second term, it became apparent that U.S. cultural infiltration of the Soviet Union was having an impact. Both VOA’s Music USA program and Amerika magazine grew in popularity among Soviets and was affecting their perceptions of the U.S.

USIA

President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the United States Information Agency (USIA) in August 1953. USIA was the Cold War’s version of Committee on Public Information (1917-1919) and Office of War Information (1942-1945).

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had no interest in retaining the State Department’s overseas information program and wanted to focus solely on policy. The

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46 Belmonte, Selling the American Way, 11.

47 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 119.
independent USIA reported directly to the president and administered both information and cultural programs.\textsuperscript{48} The agency did not wish to have the obvious tone of propaganda in the activities it conducted abroad. The official motto of USIA said that its mission “was to tell America’s story to the world.” Eisenhower believed people-to-people communication was an effective diplomatic strategy. At least once a month he met personally with the USIA’s first director, Theodore S. Streibert, who attended White House National Security Council meetings. USIA played a leading role in many of the exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. It also became the new parent organization for VOA.\textsuperscript{49}

**Increased Contact Behind the Iron Curtain**

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the effect of propaganda on the public with total precision, although opinion surveys and anecdotal evidence can provide insights on its impact. However, one can easily argue that the public diplomacy work done by USIA and the State Department helped the U.S.’ relationships with other countries. These Cold War U.S. diplomats had to convey the benefits of life under a democratic capitalist government to illustrate a world of spiritual, material, social, political and cultural freedom that those living under an oppressive Communist government could only dream about. Stationed around the world, U.S. information officers dispensed press releases, pamphlets and other materials. Cultural officers

\textsuperscript{48} However, the agency focused on information rather than cultural initiatives.

arranged for people to see American musical performances and exhibits, hear lectures by visiting Americans, borrow books from American libraries or even travel to the U.S. under education exchange programs.\textsuperscript{50}

Cultural officers were in the heart of the Soviet Empire—Moscow—and they were certainly practicing public diplomacy there. The Soviet Union considered cultural relations, as well as the broad range of exchanges, important elements in their relationship with the United States. The Soviet government was willing to allow the U.S. to conduct certain cultural activities in the Soviet Union so long as they were able to do the same in the U.S. These exchanges allowed the countries to learn about the other. They each wanted to tell the story of their country, promote their cultural achievements and encourage the study of their language. By broadening communication with the Soviet Union and subsequently, with the rest of the bloc, the United States hoped to encourage positive changes in the Soviet Union, leading to a more cooperative and constructive relationship, with less confrontation, as to avoid nuclear war.\textsuperscript{51}

However, American cultural officers stationed in the Soviet bloc during the Cold War had their work cut out for them. Laws regarding cultural exchanges varied amongst Soviet-controlled countries. Some places were lax, others were strict and others were completely closed to the West. Formally, all cultural and educational activities were controlled by a bureaucratic Soviet government, which was drastically different

\textsuperscript{50} Belmonte, \textit{Selling the American Way}, 6-7.

ideologically from the United States in addition to being suspicious and envious.\textsuperscript{52} American culture filtered slowly but still encountered a great deal of interference during its diffusion into the Soviet empire. Despite the impediments placed in the path of ideas and information from the West, cultural dissemination emerged as an important component of East-West relations.\textsuperscript{53} Yale Richmond, cultural officer during the Cold War, asserted that U.S.-Soviet cultural exchanges conducted over a period of thirty years, helped prepare the way for the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{54}

According to historian Reinhold Wagnleitner, American popular culture experienced “stupendous success” in post-war Europe.\textsuperscript{55} In Austria, for example, despite limited access to American culture, Austrians came to associate the United States with “wealth, a comfortable standard of living for the masses, freedom, modernity, the culture of consumption and a peaceful life.”\textsuperscript{56}

Following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, it appeared as if the once-solid Iron Curtain could actually be penetrable.\textsuperscript{57} American cultural tours in the Soviet bloc first became possible in 1954 when President Eisenhower called for the creation of a worldwide cultural exchange program for the performing arts. He saw that an

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{53} Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, xii.

\textsuperscript{54} Richmond, \textit{Practicing Public Diplomacy}, 88.

\textsuperscript{55} Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, xi.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., xi.

\textsuperscript{57} Richmond, \textit{Practicing Public Diplomacy}, 89.
imperative facet of Cold War strategy was to improve the world’s perception of
American cultural and political life.\(^{58}\) In 1955, the Soviets invited an American
compny of *Porgy and Bess*, which was on tour in Europe, to perform in Leningrad and
Moscow, and the show was splendidly received. The following year, performances by
violinist Isaac Stern, tenor Jan Peerce and the Boston Symphony Orchestra enjoyed
similar successes in the USSR. Furthermore, at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet
Communist Party in February 1956, Premier Nikita Khrushchev attacked his
predecessor and called for increased contacts with the West.\(^{59}\)

The 1956 National Security Council policy statement 5607, “East-West
Exchanges,” set forth the objective of the U.S. government’s policy to open the Soviet
Union to Western influences in order to change its foreign and domestic policies. This
policy document served as the basic U.S. government statement on East-West
exchanges through the 1970s. The policy began with the idea to promote evolutionary
changes with the Soviet Union toward a regime that would “abandon predatory policies
. . . and seek to promote the aspirations of the Russian people rather than the global
ambitions of International Communism . . .” According to Yale Richmond, the
objectives of U.S. policy also were to eventually garner independence from Moscow for
the satellites; to increase the Soviet bloc’s knowledge of the outside world so that its
judgments were based on fact rather than what Communist governments said; to
encourage freedom of thought; to stimulate the demand for greater personal security for
citizens; to encourage the desire for more consumer goods; and to stimulate nationalism

\(^{58}\) Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy*, 3.

\(^{59}\) Richmond, *Practicing Public Diplomacy*, 89.
within the satellites in an effort to encourage “defiance of Moscow.” The NSC statement also listed several proposals on how to accomplish these goals, including distributing official publications of each Soviet bloc country in the other countries; exchanging books, periodicals, newspapers and films; presenting stage exhibitions; ending radio jamming and censorship; encouraging tourism; and the exchanging of people in cultural, scientific and technical fields, including students and athletes.

After meeting in Geneva, the Soviet and American governments signed an agreement on October 9, 1956, indicating that the Soviets had a desire to peacefully coexist with the West. The death of Stalin in 1953 lessened tensions between the two countries and helped lead to a “cultural thaw” that allowed for a plethora of diverse cultural activities. The Soviet Union’s purpose in embarking on cultural exchanges with the West was to obtain information about American technology, politics, life and culture and to advocate for activities such as tourism and musical performances. The United States, however, saw the purpose of cultural relations with the Soviet Union as being able to expose the Soviet people to Western ideas, foster their desire for freedom and a more open-minded, tolerant and liberal society. The hope was to form a cultural policy focused on creating an impression of friendship, warmth and generosity towards the Soviet Union, but their ultimate goal was that the Soviet people would eventually begin to incorporate American values. Both countries stressed that achieving mutual

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61 Ibid., 7.

understanding would help improve the relationship. Walter Stossel Jr., acting officer in charge of European affairs, further justified cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union by arguing that they offered “Communist-indoctrinated” people realistic “knowledge of” the United States and helped win their favor with the American “way of life.” Stossel also contended that cultural interactions might rid Soviets of the notion that the United States was responsible for the Iron Curtain, which kept those in the East from the West. 63

The 1958 cultural agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union indicated the U.S. was successful in its use of the gradualist approach and it also dramatically increased U.S. cultural infiltration of the USSR. But the lasting significance the 1958 cultural agreement would have on the outcome of the conflict was not completely obvious at the time. Under the terms of the agreement, students, professors, scientists, artists, athletes, tourists and others began to have direct contact with Soviet citizens. Over the next forty years, the impact of these relationships increased the steady flow and growing appeal of Western influence in the USSR and played a role in undermining the authority of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, the 1958 cultural agreement was one of the most successful initiatives in the history of American Cold War diplomacy. 64

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63 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 29.

64 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 227.
Popular Music as Cold War Propaganda

As mentioned earlier, in 1946 Winston Churchill declared that, “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent.” Stalin saw this curtain, which isolated the East from the West, as serving two purposes. First, it would shelter the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the “disruptive influence of the West.” Second, it would provide a secure environment where regular everyday people could transform into the “New Soviet Man.” However hard he tried, Stalin was never able to fully isolate his people from being influenced by the West. Soviets and Eastern Europeans confined by Stalin’s Iron Curtain found holes and cracks in the barrier, and even created some of their own. Through these small windows to freedom, they were able to inform themselves partially on what was happening on the other side. Soviet citizens and Eastern Europeans were capable of forming their own opinions and did not necessarily accept the government’s views as their own.

The Soviet public was indeed curious about the American way and most enthusiastic to borrow from it. Despite the Soviet government’s attempts to dismiss and ridicule the United States, it still emerged, in the minds of the citizens, as the model for which they wanted their own country to develop. And as the capitalism of the United

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67 Ibid.
States did not mesh well with the Communist ideal—the fears held by Soviet leaders were justifiable. Popular culture in the USSR was strongly influenced by American taste and fashion. The Soviet government found itself following public values rather than shaping them. No matter what the government attempted, the citizens’ attachment to jazz kept it from being repressed, and thus had to be co-opted. The Komsomol, the Soviet youth league, opened jazz clubs across the Soviet Union. In the first years of the 1960s, the Soviet government thought it had finally tamed this “unruly” music—but then people got a taste of rock—another American form of music, which evolved from jazz.\textsuperscript{68} No matter how hard it tried to dictate the lives of the people it ruled, the Soviet regime simply could not control everything, and most certainly not the music that was popular.

Cultural exchanges are traditionally used by countries to show off their achievements in addition to generating good will. During the Cold War, the United States used cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union to break down barriers and promote a freer exchange of people, ideas and information. “One looks for a variety of ways where we can develop a mutual language,” said Czechoslovakian-born former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. “There are ways of showing respect for another country while showing the best of your own culture.”\textsuperscript{69} Music was a critical tool in the

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

presentation of the positive aspects and advantages of the American way of life to
Soviet citizens. Visits by American music artists brought a breath of fresh air and new
artistic concepts to the USSR. Popular music, such as jazz and rock and roll, was
particularly important in this venture because they are American-born forms of art.\textsuperscript{70}

CHAPTER II

TIME FOR JAZZ!

Jazz is a classical parallel to our American political and social system. We agree in advance on the laws and customs we abide by, and by having reached agreement, we are free to do whatever we wish within these constraints. It’s the same with jazz. The musicians agree on the key, the harmonic changes, the tempo and the duration of the piece. Within these guidelines, they are free to play what they want. And when people in other countries hear that quality in the music, it stimulates a need for the same freedom in their lives.

– Willis Conover

I thought the reason was that jazz means freedom and that today, freedom is the big word around the world . . . . if jazz means freedom, then jazz means peace because peace can come to mankind only when man is free.

– Duke Ellington

Jazz quickly became the center of the State Department’s plan for cultural tours. Because, unlike classical music, theater or ballet, it recognized that jazz was an American-born form of art. Abroad, jazz was presented as an “authentic expression” of life in the U.S. Jazz was a vibrant symbol of the ability of art to transcend barriers of all kinds while at the same time putting international relations in a complicated cultural context. Jazz was unique in how it depicted the realities and possibilities of American

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2 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 81.


4 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 11.
democracy for people abroad suffering under Communist regimes.\textsuperscript{5} Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said of jazz:

\textbf{\ldots I think jazz is obviously the most American kind of music. It has a very interesting history. It represents so much of the diversity of our roots, if you look at it from a diplomatic perspective. And then, if I were to analyze it philosophically, there’s so much freedom in its form. And there’s the fact that it comes from African American roots but is played by [so] many different kinds of people. For me, it represents the best picture of America.}\textsuperscript{6}

Jazz diplomacy, as it came to be known, gave the world a more positive view of the United States’ containment policy by revealing a softer, more nuanced version of Americans.\textsuperscript{7} Jazz increasingly appealed to people, such as those overwrought by Communism in the Soviet bloc, who were struggling for freedom. In the words of historian Lawrence Levine, jazz often gave people abroad:

\textbf{\ldots a sense of power and control . . . . It allowed [artists] to assert themselves and their feelings and their values, to communicate continuously with themselves and their peers and their oppressors as well. Here was an area in which they could at least partly drop the masks and the pretense and say what they felt, articulate what was brimming up within them and what they desperately needed to express.}\textsuperscript{8}

Through jazz, people on each side of the Iron Curtain found common ground. “Jazz helped people garner a deeper understanding of the American way of life, because

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 26.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 26.
\end{itemize}
to be interested in jazz is to be interested in things American.” Indeed, by the mid-1950s jazz was celebrated as a pivotal cultural weapon of the Cold War. As early as 1954, public affairs officers reported from Trieste (Italy) that jazz was proving itself “an effective instrument for positive American propaganda.” A recorded concert series, “From the American Jazz World,” created a response that was “so great among younger people in Trieste” that a delegation was soon approached by the director of the Allied Reading Room with a proposal to form a jazz club and local music shops reported a sharp increase in jazz record sales.10

Willis Conover and Music USA

American officials were quick to catch on to the fact that jazz was more valuable than radio programming focusing exclusively on information. In 1952, VOA began airing Jazz Club USA, hosted by Leonard Feather, a jazz pianist, composer, producer and music journalist; however, the program was short-lived.11 The successor of Jazz Club USA, which became the most popular VOA show, was Willis Conover’s Music USA.12 “However far away from home I’ve traveled covering the news these many

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10 Reading rooms were set up by the American government in key European cities where people could go to socialize and read American and other English-language materials; Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 116.


12 Ibid., 16.
years,” said Peter Jennings, ABC News anchor, in 1996, “there has remained a constant: the voice of Willis Conover via the Voice of America saying: ‘This is jazzzzz.’”\(^{13}\)

Music USA was launched on VOA over shortwave radio on January 6, 1955, following a suggestion from Charles Bohlen, President Eisenhower’s ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1957. At the start, in 1955, Music USA reached an estimated thirty million people in eighty countries, but that number more than tripled over the next decade, with the program ultimately reaching 100 million people. Conover, a modest, non-political broadcaster from Buffalo, New York, emceed the program. Unknown to those involved in the program at its beginning, Conover “was to be the single most influential ambassador of American jazz in the USSR and Eastern Europe.”\(^{14}\)

As mentioned earlier, Congress was reluctant to fund cultural program overseas because it was worried that is was “wasting taxpayers’ money by broadcasting frivolous music.”\(^{15}\) However, as time eventually showed, Conover discussed music and interviewed musicians but never mentioned politics on his program. He was an independent-minded man and had some clashes with VOA officials. Conover worked as

\(^{13}\) Heil, *Voice of America*, 289.


an independent contractor, he had full control over his programming choices and as an avid jazz fan himself—he did things his own way on his show.  

“Originally [Music USA] was aimed at the Soviet Union, because an American ambassador to the Soviet Union said there would be quite an audience for jazz in the Soviet Union,” Conover said in a 1989 interview. He continued:

But VOA wanted to precede that hour of jazz a day with something a little bit—sort of a transition hour of popular music before getting into jazz . . . . we started getting letters from listeners even further, saying, “I’m on an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf, and why do I have to wait till two o’clock in the morning to hear this program of jazz?” Which is what time it was when it got over there in that area. And so they decided to make it worldwide.  

Conover said that after a while management decided there should be news every hour on the hour, and additionally it should have news plus commentary and features. So instead of being two hours, Music USA would be two segments of forty-five minutes each.  

Conover became famous in the Soviet bloc for his jazz show. He shunned overt propaganda but he believed deeply in the potential of jazz to influence people, because for people behind the Iron Curtain “jazz represents something that is entirely different from their traditions.” Conover said the following about his show:

16 Ibid.
17 Conover, interview.
18 Ibid.
19 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 33.
20 Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 16.
My show has never been overtly political. I make no political statements. I broadcast good music, including good musicians from all countries—if they happen to fit the broad range that is the structure of my program. And I broadcast musicians in the Soviet Union, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in Romania, in Bulgaria, in Yugoslavia—for that matter in South Africa . . . . You know, it’s music. It’s music that reflects, that parallels, the structure of our society.  

According to his 1996 New York Times obituary, Conover “was known as the most famous American almost no American had ever heard of.” He was household name in Europe, Asia and Latin America but in the United States Conover was only familiar to devout jazz fans. Reader’s Digest called Willis “the world’s favorite American.” He was virtually unheard of in the U.S. because of Smith-Mundt Act provisions that prohibit the distribution of domestic VOA broadcasts. Abroad, Conover was more famous than many American diplomats. He was on the air during the administrations of eight U.S. presidents. One USIA Foreign Service officer stationed in Moscow recalled Conover’s visit there in the early 1980s:

The square outside [was] filled with people still hoping to get inside. A shadowy figure strode across the darkened stage to the microphone. “Good evening . . .” he began in the distinctive Conover rumble and got no further. A deafening ovation split the air. People stood on chairs, clapped, screamed, cheered. It lasted a good ten minutes. Why? I asked. They had listened to Willis for thirty years, recorded American jazz off the air when it was a semi-subversive act, learned to play by listening to him, and here he was in Moscow.

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21 Conover, interview.

22 Thomas, “Willis Conover Is Dead at 75.”

23 These provisions exist to this day.

Music USA drew from Conover’s personal collection of forty thousand records. The show opened with its theme, the Duke Ellington Orchestra’s rendition of “Take the A Train,” followed by Conover’s salutation, “Time for jazz!” A typical show from 1956 included songs like Count Basie’s “Straight Life,” Joe Newman’s “Midgets,” Charlie Parker’s “Air Conditioning,” the Modern Jazz Quartet’s “Django,” New Orleans trumpeter Papa Celestin’s “When the Saints Go Marching In,” Bix Beiderbecke’s “Singin’ the Blues” and “I’m All Bound ‘Round with the Mason Dixon Line” by trumpeter Jimmy McPartland. The weekly Egyptian publication, Al Zaa, declared that “Conover’s daily program has won the United States more friends than any other daily activity.”

According to surveys done by USIA in early years of the show, Music USA was heard by more Europeans, Africans and people in the Far East than any other program. Conover’s “deep, mellifluous voice and measured delivery cut through static and jamming.” VOA received mail saying that Music USA was its most popular feature. One historian has even said that the program was “probably the most effective propaganda coup in [U.S.] history.” A survey conducted in Poland revealed Conover as the “best-known living American.” In fact, soon after Music USA began airing in Poland, the Polish government reversed its long-standing opposition to jazz by


26 Ibid., 14.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.
decreeing in that the “building of socialism proceeds more lightly and more rhythmically to the accompaniment of jazz” and Radio Warsaw began playing Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and other jazz artists.\footnote{Ibid.} Adam Makowicz, a world-famous jazz pianist, who was a fourteen year old student in Poland in the mid-1950s recalled:

\begin{quote}
... a friend brought [in] a shortwave radio, a scarcity at the time, and a group of us congregated around it to listen to that new, enchanting, improvised music, coming from Willis’ program on the Voice of America. We were hooked! ... Willis spoke to us distinctly and slowly, so that even those of us who know very little English could understand ... The music, open to improvisation coming from a free country, was “our hour of freedom”: music we had not known before; it was our hope and joy which helped us to survive the dark days of censorship and other oppression.\footnote{Heil, \textit{Voice of America}, 290; Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, 117.}
\end{quote}

However, other Communist regimes were not so quick to accept jazz even when political tensions between East and West during the early Cold War were more relaxed. Radio Free Europe pointed out that Communists were unsure whether to “ban [jazz] or boom it.” The Czech and Hungarian regimes continued to label jazz a “decadent Western disease” that caused “hooliganism.” But jazz still reached people in the most stringent areas. A student from Budapest, who escaped to the West, said “we listened to jazz late at night over Radio Free Europe in the common room of the University.”\footnote{Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, 117.}

In the Soviet Union, USIA and State Department diplomats recorded evidence of people listening to Music USA, and paid careful attention to the Soviet jamming patterns. The American embassy in Moscow reported in 1958 that “Music USA continues to be an excellent program enjoying great popularity in the Soviet Union.”
a monthly basis the embassy prepared statistical surveys regarding frequencies, audibility and jamming. When traveling across the Soviet Union, diplomats would monitor VOA in various cities from the Baltic republics to Soviet Central Asia and interviewed sources about VOA programming. In one 1959 interview, two Soviet youths told an embassy diplomat that it was “permissible to listen to VOA and BBC music programs and not too risky to English-language broadcast in general.”

The stream of jazz from Music USA and other Western radio programs dismayed Soviet officials. The Kremlin was resistant to the infusion of jazz into society. Early on, Soviet officials saw jazz as the precursor of “a Yankee [cultural assault] that had already brought Western Europe to its knees.” In an attempt to resist the jazz craze, Soviets had jammed the first VOA programs, such as Jazz Club USA. However, stations like Radio Iran and Radio Luxembourg, for example, continued to entertain Soviet audiences.

Suppression and censorship of jazz in the Soviet Union eventually failed. In a tribute to Willis Conover after his death, Peter Jennings recalled, “In the midst of the Cold War, Conover landed at the Moscow airport and was greeted by a line of generals who proudly showed him the medals covering their jackets. Only underneath the medals, the Russians wore buttons which read Jazz USA.” The popularity of the

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 115.
35 Ibid.
36 Heil, Voice of America, 291.
music continued to grow despite the fact that some Soviet officials continued to view jazz as “bedlam from the decadent West.” Soviet soldiers returning from Berlin and other Eastern European capitals came home armed with the latest recordings. Jazz records were secretly sold outside GUM, Moscow’s largest state-owned department store. Soviet jazz musicians smuggled jazz records into the country from other parts of Europe, traded jazz records on the black market and engaged in heated debates about jazz. Soviet jazz enthusiasts developed homemade recordings out of x-ray sheets after discovering that the emulsion on the surface of x-ray plates provided a usable surface for sound reproduction. There were millions of these rudimentary recordings on seven-inch discs, recorded from the radio. Soviets officials were simply unable to dissuade their citizens from tuning in to jazz, so the Kremlin lifted its futile ban on listening to Western music at the end of 1955. However, the Soviets did ban *samizdat* (illegal recordings) in 1958, and even went so far as to dispatch roving bands of Komsomol music patrols to report violators, although the law was widely ignored. The appeal of jazz in the Soviet Union became so undeniable that Khrushchev attempted to co-opt the music from 1956 to 1962. After Music USA was launched in 1955, Radio Moscow began to play jazz and rhythm and blues in its broadcasts. However, black market jazz

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37 *Glavnyi Universalnyi Magazin* (main universal store)

38 *Samizdat* is a term used to describe dissident activity across the Soviet bloc in which individuals reproduced forbidden or censored publications, or in this case records, and passed the illegal paraphernalia from person to person.

remained popular; tapes of VOA jazz broadcasts sold for as much as forty rubles—forty-four dollars—on the Moscow black market in 1962.40

Jazz flourished even outside of large Soviet cities. Vassily Aksyonov, a Soviet dissident, spent his youth in the provincial city of Kazan “fiddling with the dials on our bulky wireless receivers for even a snatch of jazz.” He and his friends relished jazz for its “refusal to be pinned down . . .” For Aksyonov and many others, jazz represented release “from structures of our minutely controlled everyday lives, of five-year plans, of historical materialism.” The music became “an ideology; or rather, an anti-ideology.”

Even in the gulag, some prison camp administrators were jazz fanatics and did not object to talented inmates forming bands. Some prisoners were given special privileges and allowed to tour.41 In the Russian Far East city of Vladivostok, Yaroslav Balagush, a VOA monitor and jazz enthusiast, wrote after learning of Conover’s death in 1996 that Music USA was:

. . . the first radio school of jazz for Russia . . . . Its graduates are still grateful to Mr. Conover for teaching them jazz long distance, although a great part of his pupils never saw their teacher in person . . . . Willis Conover served as a link between [the greatest jazz masters] and jazz listeners all over the world . . . this is why I think that his place should be right beside Satchmo, Duke, Count and the Bird.42

On Conover’s ten thousandth VOA broadcast, President Ronald Reagan congratulated him and recollected the sentiment of two Bulgarians who had fled to the United States, “We are two lucky escapees from behind the Iron Curtain . . . and we


41 Hixson, Parting the Curtain, 115-116.

42 Heil, Voice of America, 291.
have been living for years with you, your voice, your music. There is absolutely no way we can describe what enormous importance you have for somebody living back there . . . You are the music, you are the light, you are America.” In 1993, Congress passed a resolution saluting Conover, “the man who had been called one of the country’s greatest foreign policy tools.” Conover was clearly an important figure in the spread of jazz and in its relationship to Cold War foreign policy. When Conover passed away in 1996 his New York Times obituary, in addition to paying tribute to him by proclaiming that he was the most widely known and loved American in the world, suggested he had played a major role in bringing about the collapse of Communism—a claim which Conover had been proud to embrace. Shortly after Conover’s death, Charles Osgood, a CBS commentator, said:

Probably it would be too much to say that the sweet clarion call of all those trumpets and saxophones, the joyful noise of the piano, bass and drums and other instruments caused the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. So maybe Willis Conover was not exactly Joshua. But in a sense, he was. Because finally, after all that music all those years, the walls finally did come tumbling down.

**Soviet Bloc Youth**

The cultural thaw that followed Joseph Stalin’s 1953 death allowed Soviet jazz enthusiasts to publicly defend the music as a legitimate art form. Despite the Komsomol’s warnings to cease listening to and playing the music, rebellious youth and music lovers flaunted jazz, allowing it to flourish behind the Iron Curtain. Thus, the

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image and prestige of the United States, jazz’s originator, was simultaneously advanced.\textsuperscript{46}

Jazz was one of the main influences of the \textit{stiliagi}, “stylish men” or “style hunters,” a group comprised mainly of Soviet youth, who sought out foreign tourists, listened to American music, watched American movies, wore American clothing styles and groomed their hair in American dos. The trend began in the late 1940s and early 1950s and was influenced by the strong interest in jazz. The majority of \textit{stiliagi} came from the Soviet middle-class, privileged families who were relatively prosperous. Its children could afford fancy tape recorders and fashionable clothes. “What had begun as a fad among the children of the elite well before the death of Stalin,” historian S. Frederick Starr observed, “had burgeoned into a full-scale revolt by alienated Soviet youths.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{Stiliagi} were not just in the major Soviet cities. Even smaller cities and provincial areas were getting their hands on Western fashions and cutting their hair to look like their idols in the West. Some \textit{stiliagi} asked to be called Western names, such as “Alfred, Max and Rex” or “Peter and Bob” instead of their “good Slavic names.”\textsuperscript{48}

In Moscow \textit{stiliagi} “hung out” in restaurants and whimsically referred to the

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\textsuperscript{46}Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, 116.
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\textsuperscript{48}Zhuk, \textit{Rock and Roll in the Rocket City}, 87.
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fashionable *Gorky Prospekt* as “Broadway.” In the mid-1950s, the Soviet media launched a public campaign against the *stiliagi* in the hope of humiliating them into an orthodox Soviet lifestyle. The *stiliagi* were depicted as spoiled children who wasted time and their parents’ money trying to imitate Western teenagers. However, the *stiliagi* were not deterred, their lifestyle was a “vicarious escape . . . A pack of Marlboro cigarettes or a jazz recording . . . brought them a little closer to the sounds and smells of America and helped them, if only briefly, escape the sulfuric odor of brown coal and the incessant drone of socialist polemic.”

About thirty thousand young people in their twenties and thirties—Communists included—came to Moscow from all over the world to attend the Sixth World Youth Festival in the summer of 1957. The festival marked a turning point in the cultural history of the Soviet Union. Up until that time, the Kremlin had made every attempt to ward off outside cultural influences, but surprisingly it was welcoming these thirty thousand young people into the capital city. About twice as many Soviet youths attended the festival than other nationalities, but they found themselves influenced by the foreigners. American youths who attended the event questioned Soviet propaganda while furthering the process of cultural infiltration. Soviet youths had been taking advantage of the more relaxed atmosphere of the Khrushchev era and had already become accustomed to socializing with Western tourists. Americans attracted the attention of thousands of young people from Communist regimes at the festival through the clothes they wore, their music and their behavior. It was an unprecedented Soviet exposure to the music, fashion, consumer goods, ideas and political perspectives of

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Western youth, leaving a permanent cultural imprint on the younger generation in the Soviet bloc.\textsuperscript{50}

Alexei Kozlov, a Moscow musician who played in jazz clubs organized by the Komsomol, credited the festival with triggering a mass interest in Western popular culture, eventually affecting all Soviet entertainment. Indeed, after the 1957 festival, jazz got special protection and guidance from the Komsomol. In just two years, all district Komsomol organizations had begun opening jazz clubs, then jazz cafes and later started the annual jazz festivals first in Tartu and Tallinn and then in Moscow, Leningrad, Gorkii and Voronezh.\textsuperscript{51}

There was pressure from Soviet youth to change the national stance on jazz. Historian Jerimi Suri has argued that the “dissent culture” of the 1960s was in part due to encouragement to rebel by the large number of foreign students in Soviet universities.\textsuperscript{52} In early 1961, \textit{Komsomolskaya}, the official newspaper of Soviet youth, proposed a nationwide network of jazz nightclubs—after denouncing jazz for years.\textsuperscript{53} By the mid-1960s, popular jazz clubs in the Soviet Union were flourishing. Positive discussions about both American and Russian jazz were increasingly appearing in

\textsuperscript{50} Hixson, \textit{Parting the Curtain}, 159-160.

\textsuperscript{51} Zhuk, \textit{Rock and Roll in the Rocket City}, 76.

\textsuperscript{52} Von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows Up the World}, 99.

Soviet publications, such as *Smena* (Change). It was clear by then that the Soviet authorities accepted the fact that jazz was serious music.\(^54\)

This “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” mentality of the Soviet authorities regarding jazz is a microcosm of the overall situation. The Soviet establishment could not control the enthusiasm for jazz—so they opened state-sponsored jazz clubs. The process was slow, but eventually these small concessions made by the government, and the fascination for many things American, helped bring down the Iron Curtain.

**Jazz Diplomacy**

In addition to radio, another opening to the West was provided by American jazz greats who traveled the world over on behalf of the United States government.\(^55\) The visits by American and other Western artists was a breath of fresh air for Soviet audiences. Orthodoxy and conservatism had long reigned in USSR performing arts, and Western artists brought new concepts in music, dance and theater to the bloc. The latest art forms—such as jazz—that cultural exchanges brought to the Soviet Union demonstrated American preeminence in the arts.\(^56\) The State Department planned on using the jazz tours as a “legitimizing and humanizing force.” It hoped that by using the “affective power of music,” critics of U.S. policy would identify with America no

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\(^54\) Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, 74.

\(^55\) Richmond, *Practicing Public Diplomacy*, 93.

matter was its policies. The tours were designed specifically to showcase how American art, freedom and democracy were unique and exceptional.  

In 1958, the State Department began collaborating with George Wein, a jazz producer who worked with the Newport Jazz Festival and his colleague Robert Jones to facilitate jazz tours to the Eastern Bloc. Although some American artists were reluctant to make cultural contacts behind the Iron Curtain, many were eager participants and supporters of cultural initiatives in that part of the world. Indeed, a large number of artists made official trips abroad for the U.S. government, including Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, the New York Jazz Repertory, Dave Brubeck and the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra. Thus, musicians joined with critics and State Department personnel to enthusiastically promote the importance of art in American foreign policy. Although each band leader—Gillespie, Goodman, Brubeck—was different in style and

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58 The Newport Jazz Festival was founded in Newport, Rhode Island in 1954 by socialite Elaine Lorillard. Together with her husband, Louis, Lorillard financed the annual summer festival for many years. The couple hired George Wein to organize the event. In 1958, the State Department began working with Wein to help produce official Eastern European jazz tours.


personality, they all emerged from their tours as a passionate advocates of government support of jazz and the arts.62

Incidentally, this compelling benign propaganda ploy was hardly an original idea of the State Department. Promoting jazz musicians as cultural ambassadors was an innovation created by an alliance of musicians, civil rights proponents, cultural entrepreneurs and critics.63 Fully aware of jazz’s international appeal, Louis Armstrong, “Ambassador Satch” himself, was in full support of tours to the Soviet Union. He told Variety that he saw the potential of jazz to “lessen world tensions,” especially in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations, because, as he put it, when “you sit down to play jazz, to blow with Satchmo, there is no enmity.”64 Armstrong said, “. . . everywhere I have gone in the world, I have been well received and understood.”65 He witnessed Russian musicians’ dedication and love for jazz firsthand while performing in West Germany when he met some people who had “slipped” over the Iron Curtain.66 As artists, Soviet musicians identified with their American counterparts and they regarded them as the foremost international symbols of creativity and freedom.67

Proponents of the tours, like Armstrong, often cited the popularity of jazz in Europe to make their case. By spreading jazz globally the goal was to win converts to

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63 Ibid., 6.

64 Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy*, 66.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 125.
“the American way of life.” Jazz diplomacy helped enhance American influence in areas where none might otherwise have existed. In these arenas, American officials continually emphasized the inspirational and cultural appeal of jazz. Robert C. Schnitzer, of the American National Theater and Academy, commended the jazz ambassadors and called jazz “one of the most useful weapons we have in our arsenal.”

In November 1955, just three weeks before the approval of the first U.S. government-sponsored jazz tours, Felix Belair, a Stockholm correspondent for the New York Times, was in Switzerland for the East-West conference when he saw Louis Armstrong as he passed through on tour. Belair, in support of the State Department using jazz musicians as ambassadors, argued, “Men have actually risked their lives to smuggle recordings of [jazz] behind the Iron Curtain . . .” He proclaimed that “America’s secret weapon is a blue note in a minor key” and named Louis, “Satchmo” Armstrong, as “its most effective ambassador.” That Armstrong tour was then commemorated on the album “Ambassador Satch.” From 1955 on, Armstrong was greeted enthusiastically by foreign audiences wherever he went. Whether on official State Department tours such as his 1960-1961 African trip, or on unofficial journeys such as those to Ghana in 1956, Latin America in 1957 and East Berlin, Armstrong was Ambassador Satch.

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69 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 87.

70 Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 10.

71 Ibid., 12.
Dizzy Gillespie was the first jazz musician to do an official tour for the U.S. government when he traveled to the Middle East in 1956. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the Democratic congressman from Harlem, was instrumental in arranging the Gillespie visit. According to a November 1955 *New York Times* report, the State Department had told Powell “that it would go along with his proposal to send fewer ballets and symphonies abroad and put more emphasis on what he called real Americana.”  

During the overseas trip, Dizzy Gillespie and his band flew to Athens to play a matinee for students following the stoning of the U.S. Information Service office by students angered by U.S. support of Greece’s right-wing dictatorship. The band said that the anti-American feeling was intense as it played to a seething audience of students. However, the young people loved the music so much that when the band finished playing members of the audience carried Gillespie on their shoulders and through the streets of Athens. Gillespie wired President Eisenhower: “Our trip through the Middle East proved conclusively that our interracial group was powerfully effective against Red propaganda. Jazz is our own American folk music that communicates with all peoples regardless of language and social barriers.” Gillespie was the “jam-bassador” the State Department needed; with him the Department got more democracy and more action than they could have imagined. 

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72 Ibid., 6.

73 The U.S. Information Service was the designation of USIA overseas.


75 Ibid.
Propaganda?” in Saturday Review, believed that the 1956 Gillespie tour elevated the art of jazz while also winning friends for the United States.\textsuperscript{76}

The Dave Brubeck Quartet was sent across the Iron Curtain in 1958 to East Germany and Poland. It also traveled to Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Middle East.\textsuperscript{77} In Poland, Brubeck helped jazz gain respect and updated the Poles on this music.\textsuperscript{78} Brubeck said to Ralph Gleason, a jazz critic, that “whenever there was a dictatorship in Europe, jazz was outlawed. And when freedom returned to those countries, the playing of jazz inevitably accompanied it.” At performances Brubeck would often say, “No dictatorship can tolerate jazz. It is the first sign of a return to freedom,”\textsuperscript{79} which always drew tremendous applause. Brubeck claimed that the word “freedom” was in “in the mouths of everybody we had to do with [during the tour].”\textsuperscript{80} He wholeheartedly believed in jazz as a symbol of democracy.\textsuperscript{81} Cultural tours to the Middle East were important; in 1957 the Eisenhower administration declared the need to defend the region against the aggression of states “controlled by international [C]ommunism.”\textsuperscript{82} The Brubeck tour was a “circle of

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{77} Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 47; Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 74.

\textsuperscript{78} Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 75.

\textsuperscript{79} Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 51.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{81} Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 77.

\textsuperscript{82} Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 127.
Russia,” a classic containment maneuver in cultural form. Ironically perhaps, when the quartet played in Afghanistan, there were more Russians in the audience than Afghans.\textsuperscript{83} Brubeck said that the tour was one of the “great events” in his life and he eventually would travel abroad many more times for the State Department.\textsuperscript{84}

Ambassador Satch made an unofficial trip to the British Gold Coast Colony (soon after to be known as Ghana) in 1956, which led to his official gigs for the State Department in 1960 and 1961.\textsuperscript{85} The 1956 Ghana tour was such a success from the view of the U.S. government that it began making plans to send Armstrong on an official tour to the Soviet Union and South America the following year. However, the tour was postponed due to a civil rights crisis in the South. After the 1957 Little Rock ordeal, when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to block African American students from entering Central High School, Armstrong said that “the Government can go to hell,” for treating “his people” is such a manner.\textsuperscript{86} The State Department immediately issued a statement expressing hope that Armstrong “would not let the segregation issue keep him from making a musical mission to Moscow.” But Armstrong stood his ground. Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock to uphold integration a week later. Armstrong praised the decision as being “just wonderful,” but he continued to express his outrage over the events. Secretary of State John Foster

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 63.
Dulles told Attorney General Herbert Brownell that the Little Rock situation “was ruining our foreign policy.” Since Armstrong was known as “Ambassador Satch” in many parts of the world, the State Department felt his participation in the tours was essential. Armstrong agreed to do a commercial tour of South America in November of 1957, six weeks after the Russian launch of Sputnik.\textsuperscript{87} In October 1960, Armstrong began an official tour of twenty-seven African cities.\textsuperscript{88}

Although the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a landmark cultural exchange agreement in 1958, the years immediately preceding the first official jazz tour in the Soviet Union were particularly volatile.\textsuperscript{89} Paul Kapp, manager of the Delta Rhythm Boys, suggested that the group be the first American jazz artists in Russia.\textsuperscript{90} George Avakian, Benny Goodman’s manager, recalled that Soviet officials refused the offer of a Louis Armstrong tour because they feared that his style of jazz was so exuberant it might cause riots. When Avakian suggested Duke Ellington, Soviet officials said he was “too far out.” But the Soviets agreed to Avakian’s suggestion of a Benny Goodman tour declaring that he “would be best . . . . After all, our orchestras play his music, and the public will understand his music, they’ve heard . . . that kind of swing.”\textsuperscript{91} Thus, in March 1962, Goodman’s tour was announced, making him and his

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 64-65.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 67.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{90} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 30.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 118.
orchestra the first jazz musicians to tour the Soviet Union for the State Department. A Department source said that when Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman were suggested to the Soviets, USSR officials found Goodman more palatable because his style of music was more conservative. Despite being a strong advocate for jazz diplomacy in the Soviet bloc, Armstrong never made it to the Soviet Union before his death in July 1971. From May 28 through July 8, 1962, Goodman and his band made thirty appearances in six Soviet cities. Goodman had already established himself as an effective jazz ambassador during his 1956-1957 tour of Asia. State Department officials saw the Goodman tour as a unique opportunity to fight the “cultural Cold War.”

Despite political tensions, especially those revolving around the military occupation in Berlin, the United States and the Soviet Union extended the 1958 cultural agreement at the end of November 1959, which paved the way for the opening toward jazz tours in the USSR in 1961 and 1962. The Michigan University Symphonic Band did an official tour to the Soviet bloc, including Baltic cities early in 1961. The group


93 Ibid., 103.

94 Ibid., 207.

95 Ibid., 92.

96 Ibid., 94.

97 Ibid., 95.

played jazz tunes; but the American ambassador knew that Soviet officials were ambivalent toward the music and thus decided not to identify it too closely with jazz in formal public programs. 99

It was not until after the Michigan University Symphonic Band tour that the Soviets agreed to have Benny Goodman for a visit. Goodman had long been lobbying to play in the USSR and his persistence was evidently instrumental in the decision to finally send him for the first official State Department jazz tour of the USSR. The Goodman performances were to be a highlight of the 1959 expansion of the U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement. The front-page of the New York Times proclaimed, “U.S. and Soviet to Expand Their Cultural Exchange: Benny Goodman to Tour.” Alan Rich wrote that “after more than seven years of frustrated hopes, Benny Goodman is being allowed to take his music to the Soviet Union.” 100

Goodman and his band embarked on their journey on May 27, 1962. 101 Tickets for the orchestra’s premiere concert at the 4,600-seat arena of the Central Army Sports Club sold out days in advance. Even Premier and Mrs. Khrushchev were present. 102 Soviet and American commentators judged the show to be a great success and that Khrushchev’s presence demonstrated the “new respectability of jazz in the Soviet

99 Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 117.


101 Ibid., 105.

102 Ibid., 106-107.
Several newspapers noted that Khrushchev voiced sincere appreciation for Goodman’s music.\textsuperscript{104}

However, the State Department quickly learned Goodman had a penchant for erratic behavior. He embarrassed U.S. officials by cancelling scheduled classical concerts because he felt the Russian orchestras were not good enough. He also ignored an invitation by the Moscow Conservatory to visit and play music with the students. Surprisingly, however, Goodman performed an impromptu solo concert in Red Square. So, he was up to the task of winning the hearts and minds of Russians—but in his own way.\textsuperscript{105} While Goodman continued to keep Soviet and American officials on their toes with his unpredictability, his band kept busy sightseeing, meeting jazz fans in Moscow, visiting youth clubs and having jam sessions at a local jazz club.\textsuperscript{106} The State Department was pleased with the band’s unofficial interactions with Soviets, which continued when the group visited Sochi and Leningrad.\textsuperscript{107} They also hit Tbilisi, Tashkent and Kiev during the tour.\textsuperscript{108}

Leonard Feather, in his capacity as a jazz critic, traveled to the Soviet Union during the Goodman tour, not only to attend some of the concerts, but also to survey the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 108-109.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 118.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows Up the World}, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 110.
\item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 111.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 113-117.
\end{itemize}
jazz world there. Feather observed that Soviet jazz fans were just like those in the United States, shouting and whistling enthusiastically at performances. The magazine, *Down Beat*, expressed hope that the tour would encourage Soviet and American jazz artists to form more active relationships. *Variety* magazine declared that Goodman and his band had achieved a “cultural coup” by helping jazz be accepted as a legitimate form of art. Similarly, Yuri Vikharieff, Russian jazz pianist, asserted that Goodman provided momentum towards a peaceful relationship. And Soviet youth, for its part—despite its fright, ambivalence and determination—established lasting contacts, friends and memories. Young persons’ efforts reflected the Soviet people’s embrace of the Goodman tour as a symbol of mutual understanding.

The Goodman tour was hailed by many as a “rousing and inspiring turning point on both sides of the Iron Curtain.” The tour began mere months before the Cuban missile crisis. *Time* magazine reported on the “Rhapsody in Russia” and how when Goodman and his orchestra “blew into Leningrad” it was “the happiest crew the band had yet encountered.” The group’s appeal grew as Goodman performed from city to city. Soviet jazz scholar, Vladimir Feurtag, recalled that at the concert in St. Petersburg, some young Soviet fans risked arrest to hear and see the Americans and their music.

By the end of Goodman and his band’s musical journey, the worn-out group had played thirty concerts before 176,800 people. Overall, the State Department felt the tour boosted the respectability of jazz in the Soviet Union and had been an important

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110 Ibid., 118.
success.\textsuperscript{111} The Goodman performances emerged as a global symbol of the softening of U.S.-Soviet cultural relations that briefly came about in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{112} After the band returned, President John F. Kennedy praised the overseas visit as an inspired moment in the Cold War. In a letter to Khrushchev following the Goodman tour, Kennedy expressed his support for cultural relations with the Soviet Union declaring he was honored by Khrushchev’s presence at the Moscow Goodman concert and that he looked forward to attending a performance by the Bolshoi Ballet when it came to the United States.\textsuperscript{113} However, for a brief time following Goodman’s success in the USSR, the Communist Party renewed an edict in the winter of 1963 against jazz, because it was concerned about the increasing U.S. cultural influence in the USSR. The following spring, Khrushchev succumbed to pressure for freer expression and let the edict go. The Soviets even stopped jamming VOA.\textsuperscript{114}

Despite the Cuban missile crisis, cultural negotiations between the United States and Soviet Union continued. The key players in the crisis—President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Premier Khrushchev—all believed that cultural exchanges created a bridge to understanding each other even during the most tense moments of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{115} American involvement in Vietnam also jeopardized U.S.-

\textsuperscript{111} Von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows Up the World}, 118.
\textsuperscript{112} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 3.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{114} Von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows Up the World}, 120.
\textsuperscript{115} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 122.
bloc affairs—the Soviets considered a “freeze” on cultural relations because of the war. Czechoslovakia cancelled many American tours because of the conflict in the Far East.\textsuperscript{116} Poland publicly denounced the American policies in Vietnam and consequently decreased cultural tours with the United States. Romania also cancelled some tours.\textsuperscript{117} The Soviet Union expressed its opposition to American policy in Vietnam by thwarting cultural interactions. An impasse was reached when the Soviet Union refused to accept the number of American groups previously specified in an exchange agreement. In the cultural arena, Rusk did not waver from his position regarding the preservation of the more relaxed relationship with the Soviet Union. A resolution was finally reached in March 1966. Yuri Saulskii, the Russian jazz advocate from the USSR State Concert Agency, Goskonsert, who helped arrange Soviet jazz tours, said that American jazz in the Soviet Union was a real challenge to authorities because it had become so coveted by the Russian people.\textsuperscript{118} In the mid-1960s, following the political disputes concerning the Vietnam War, jazz diplomacy was called upon to alleviate tensions. The use of art, mainly jazz music, with its dynamic qualities, became paramount to the reshaping of the cultural image of the United States as the country adjusted to the countless challenges that arose from new and increasingly contentious Cold War exigencies. Jazz diplomacy was a crucial element in the resurrection of the cultural thaw between the United States and the Soviet Union that had begun with Geneva. Jazz had become an indispensable

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 125.
Cold War device used to bridge the cultural and ideological differences between the superpowers.119

On August 28, 1963, the Duke Ellington Orchestra left New York for its first of many State Department sponsored tours. For three months it toured the Middle East with stops in Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, India, Ceylon, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey.120 Before his death in 1974, Ellington would tour the Soviet Union, make two trips to Africa, travel to Eastern Europe and go all over South America and South Asia for the State Department. Ellington was a true believer in America’s Cold War mission of promoting the superiority of American democracy abroad.121 Unlike what the State Department experienced with Benny Goodman, Ellington and his band consistently impressed American diplomats with their professionalism. In Afghanistan, U.S. officials sought to impress not only Afghans, but Russians as well. Indeed, as was the case with Dave Brubeck’s experiences in 1958, Russians turned out in large numbers for the Ellington concert in Kabul.122 Unfortunately, the tour came to an abrupt end after the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. The State Department cancelled the remainder of scheduled performances, which were to take place in Turkey, Cyprus, the United Arab Republic, Greece and Yugoslavia. Ellington wanted to continue the tour arguing that his music expressed the spectrum of human

119 Ibid., 128.

120 Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 121.

121 Ibid., 123.

122 Ibid., 129.
emotions, but the State Department wanted to avoid offending local traditions, which forbade public performances in a time of mourning.\textsuperscript{123}

The second U.S. government sponsored jazz tour of the Soviet Union was not until 1966 when the Earl Hines Quartet traveled there.\textsuperscript{124} The tour made a lasting impact on Soviets, significantly improving the image of Americans. In addition to scheduled concerts, the performers also mingled with Soviet citizens and held jam sessions attended by enthusiastic admirers and local musicians.\textsuperscript{125} Some Soviet fans were insistent on meeting band members in secret locations, despite the fact that Soviet officials and Goskonsert discouraged unofficial contact with the visiting musicians. Michael Zwerin, Hine’s trombone player, described his experiences during the tour in an article in \textit{Down Beat}. He shared that the drum set of their drummer, Oliver Jackson, had been misplaced. A Soviet fan was more than enthusiastic to loan Jackson his drum set, which he used during some of the initial concerts. Zwerin remarked that American officials were confident that the band would be able to create goodwill in the Soviet Union because its citizens were “hungry for American jazz.” Indeed, the reporting officer asserted that the tour made an indelible impact on the Soviet people, and that the musicians significantly helped improve the image of the American way of life.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 192.

\textsuperscript{125} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 130.
Likewise, the American embassy in Moscow reported that the band achieved astonishing success.\textsuperscript{126}

Despite Hines’ spectacular achievement, however, concerts in Moscow and Leningrad were cancelled a week into the tour. Prior to the cancellations, Hines had sold out concerts in the Kiev Sports Palace over four nights, playing for forty thousand people total. In Tbilisi, 3,000-4,000 people came to each concert. From what the State Department could gather, it appeared that the band’s obvious appeal and the prospect of “even more stormy” successes in Leningrad and Moscow had become a Soviet concern.\textsuperscript{127}

Under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, who assumed office in October of 1964, the cultural atmosphere in the Soviet Union was still strict yet comparatively more open than under previous regimes. Astute Soviet jazz fans became more vocal about their desire to increase their contact with the West. They also began requesting the specific types of music they wanted to hear. For instance, listeners of \textit{Jazz on VOA} suggested that the radio show play the music of modern groups from New York’s trendiest places, rather than more traditional music, because they wanted to be “up” on the latest and greatest. In 1966 Louis Armstrong even appeared on Soviet television for the first time as a guest on \textit{Evening Meeting}, where he performed the popular song, “Mack the Knife.”\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 130.


\textsuperscript{128} Davenport, \textit{Jazz Diplomacy}, 126.
Jazz tours in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1970s were thought by many in the State Department to be the pinnacle of cultural exchanges. In previous tours, musicians and government officials had differing views on who their audience was during the earlier tours. Musicians were apt to reach out to local instrumentalists and other regular citizens whereas U.S. officials were looking to reach out to elites. But by the 1970s, the State Department increasingly realized how much the “everyday man” mattered, and began trying to bypass the Communist hierarchy. They began to view Soviet citizens as political agents who were just “oppressed democrats among whom freedom and democracy would thrive if given the chance.”

Even with bloc authorities attempting to restrict jazz, festivals were held frequently in Eastern Europe. Variety reported in 1966 that American socialite and co-founder of the Newport Jazz Festival, Elaine Lorillard, and jazz pianist Billy Taylor encouraged the superpowers to simmer the rivalry by sponsoring an exchange of jazz festivals. By the end of the year, jazz festivals had taken place in Moscow and Leningrad. During the Administration of President Richard Nixon, the opening of trade relations with the Soviet Union and the liberalization of many Eastern European regimes paved the way for numerous jazz musicians to visit the Eastern bloc under the sponsorship of the Newport Jazz Festival. In 1970, Alvin Ailey and, in 1971, Duke


\[130\] Davenport, Jazz Diplomacy, 126.

\[131\] Ibid., 128.
Ellington each had successful tours in the Soviet Union. The tickets for Ellington’s 1971 Moscow performances were sold on the black market for as much as eighty rubles; at the time, a theater ticket was rarely more than four rubles.

Due to the State Department’s relationship with George Wein, and accordingly the Newport Jazz Festival, it was able to pick up two Newport acts touring Europe in October of 1970, Dave Brubeck and Earl Hines. Brubeck was delighted to return to Warsaw twelve years after his first State Department tour. Brubeck and his wife, Iola, had formed and maintained several relationships from the 1958 tour, which led to him giving exclusive interviews to several Polish music magazines. As a result of his conversation with Jazz magazine, Brubeck and his baritone saxophonist, Gerry Mulligan, donated their payment for the recording of their performance to a fund dedicated to the development of music and jazz clubs in Poland. The State Department was very pleased with the musicians’ interest in making contacts “at all levels of society” and praised them publicly. The American embassy in Warsaw said that the Brubeck group gave the impression “not only of superb jazz musicians on a State Department-sponsored tour but also of Americans who are superb representatives of the United States in every way.”

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133 Richmond, Practicing Public Diplomacy, 93.


135 Ibid., 191.
The Earl Hines Quartet, as well as Brubeck and Mulligan, performed during the Romanian “First Festival of Jazz Week” in November 1970. Brubeck, as in other countries, was open and accessible to Romanians. Hines was equally great at this undertaking. Following the Quartet’s concert on November 4, the group was greeted by two hundred members of the local Jazz Club for a late night reception and jam session with Romanian musicians. Hines also did several interviews with the local press and radio before continuing on to Belgrade for the Yugoslav Newport Festival. Hines joined fellow jazz musicians, Charles Mingus and Anita O’Day, in Belgrade where they performed before 1,400-1,600 people. Additionally, Radio Belgrade played the concert in its entirety in the days following the performance and Belgrade Television broadcast the first program, featuring Mingus as a half-hour show on November 13.\(^\text{136}\)

In April 1971, the partnership between Wein and the State Department got vibraphonist Lionel Hampton scheduled to do State Department-sponsored concerts in Warsaw, Budapest and Bucharest. U.S. embassy officials in Warsaw reported that the audience did not want to let go of Hampton. Hampton, in turn, was an enthusiastic ambassador, generous both onstage and off. After a performance in Belgrade, he and his band had an impromptu jam session that went on until the early morning hours. In Budapest, Hampton would extend his concert to well after midnight. At one point during the tour he and his band talked with a group of musicians, critics and press for

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 192-194.
three hours. In Bucharest, Hampton and his band visited Romanian jazz clubs and played with local musicians until six in the morning.\textsuperscript{137}

At the end of 1971, the State Department and Newport Jazz Festival held the spectacular “American Jazz Week in Eastern Europe.” For seven days, five groups rotated among International Jazz Festivals in Warsaw, Belgrade, Budapest and Prague, where they played twenty-one concerts before coming together in Bucharest. From October 29 to November 4, groups visited the capitals of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania. These performers included the Duke Ellington Orchestra, the Preservation Hall Band, Ornette Coleman, the Giants of Jazz and Gary Burton. Dizzy Gillespie even joined as part of the Giants of Jazz review. The Miles Davis Orchestra also appeared commercially in Europe, but was not officially sponsored by the State Department because it found Davis to be controversial.\textsuperscript{138} Audiences loved the performances—jazz was fulfilling the U.S. government’s goal to penetrate the Iron Curtain.\textsuperscript{139}

The end of 1971 also brought Duke Ellington to an eagerly awaiting Soviet Union. In his autobiography, \textit{Music Is My Mistress}, Ellington wrote that the anticipation of the Russia tour was so great that “there is a risk of being consumed by it.” One U.S. official reported, “Ellington was a mythical figure for the hard-core thousands of truly dedicated Soviet jazz aficionados that waited for his arrival in the USSR with

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 196-197.

\textsuperscript{138} Miles Davis was known to be bad tempered and confrontational. He also struggled with sex, drugs and alcohol addiction during his lifetime.

\textsuperscript{139} Von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows Up the World}, 198.
something akin to the anticipation of a Second Coming.” Secretary of State William P. Rogers told President Nixon that one young fan yelled, “We’ve been waiting for you for centuries!” In Kiev, Ellington and his orchestra were surprised by the quantity of police in the concert hall. They found out that most of the policemen were in one of the best local jazz bands and were unable to get tickets to the sold-out concert, so they all put their uniforms on and then had no trouble getting in to see the show. In Moscow, the last leg of the tour, the American Embassy reported that hundreds of people traveled from as far as Odessa, Riga and Yakutsk for the concerts. Tickets for the shows in Moscow were scalped for as much as fifty dollars apiece. The Soviets even requested two last minute matinees to the schedule at the ten thousand-seat Luzhniki Sports Palace, much to the State Department’s delight. The tour was called “the greatest coup in the history of musical diplomacy” by Leonard Feather. Ellington was ecstatic and both the State Department and the Soviet public were overjoyed with the success of the tour.

The Ellington Orchestra played twenty-two concerts in five cities to 126,000 people. When asked why he thought American jazz was so much in vogue in other countries, Ellington answered, “I thought the reason was that jazz means freedom and

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140 Ibid., 206.
141 Ibid., 212.
142 Ibid., 213.
143 Ibid., 214.
144 Ibid., 206.
that today, freedom is the big word around the world.” He professed that “if jazz means freedom, then jazz means peace because peace can come to mankind only when man is free.” The State Department and the orchestra became frustrated by Soviet officials attempting to minimize and monitor contacts between American and Soviet musicians. They were able to squeeze in a couple jam sessions in Leningrad. The State Department was able to make contacts from jam sessions at Leningrad jazz clubs and then generate profiles on the clubs. These profiles identified key players from whom U.S. officials attempted to understand factional disputes in order to augment American intelligence on Soviet citizens who had the potential to be pro-American.

The final series of jazz tours orchestrated by the State Department and Newport Festival Productions included more festivals in Eastern Europe and then pickup tours such as the tour of Africa by Duke Ellington, B.B. King and Dizzy Gillespie at the end of 1973. Jazz remained at the heart of the Eastern European cultural presentation programs. In November 1973, the Newport Jazz Festival brought a strong lineup to the fourth annual festival in Belgrade, including Sarah Vaughan, B.B. King, Miles Davis, the Stars of Faith, the Oscar Peterson Trio, the Young Giants of Jazz and Duke Ellington. Some of these groups additionally performed in Zagreb and Ljubljana. In


147 Some might say that this behavior was spying by the American government and not in the spirit of cultural exchange; Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 210.

each city, the concerts were filmed and then shown on future television broadcasts.\textsuperscript{149}

From October 23 to November 16, 1974 another roving Newport Festival toured Eastern Europe including the Sonny Rollins Quintet, the Stan Getz Quartet, the McCoy Tyner Quintet and a jazz program called, “The Musical Life of Charlie Parker.” The groups gave fifteen concerts in six cities, including Warsaw, Bucharest, Budapest and Belgrade. Dan Morgenstern and Willis Conover put together the three-hour Charlie Parker program, which featured twenty-two musicians.\textsuperscript{150} In 1975, the State Department and Newport sponsored the Charles Mingus Sextet in Hungary and Romania, Sarah Vaughan and Trio in Poland and the New York Repertory paying homage to Louis Armstrong. Then, in 1976 Festival Productions followed up with Newport programs in Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Portugal. The festival featured music from the McCoy Tyner Sextet, the Gil Evans Orchestra, the Muddy Waters Sextet, the Sonny Rollins Quintet and Betty Carter and Trio. Like the rest of the American performers before them, these groups received high praise, but it was one of the last official State Department tours.\textsuperscript{151}

The State Department never missed an opportunity to promote jazz in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, by the mid-1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam pullout, the Watergate scandal and the energy crisis, some officials were calling for a

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 228.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 245.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 246.
more modest foreign policy.\textsuperscript{152} Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, however, did send the Buddy Guy-Junior Wells Band on a tour of Africa for damage control during the Angolan crisis of 1975.\textsuperscript{153} The band toured West and central Africa from November 25, 1975 until January 13, 1976.\textsuperscript{154}

The last scheduled official State Department jazz tour was by Clark Terry and his Jolly Giants. From January 23 to February 26, 1978, the group played in Cairo, Alexandria, Athens, Istanbul, Ankara, Kabul, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Karachi, Lahore, Calcutta and New Delhi.\textsuperscript{155} After 1978, cultural presentations moved out of the hands of the State Department and into a reorganized USIA. They were not as high profile, and except for tours to the Soviet Union, lacked the ambition of the earlier tours.\textsuperscript{156}

For decades, jazz musicians officially represented America for people around the world. Audiences fell in love with the jazz ambassadors not only for their creativity and talent—but for all the ways in which they voiced their kinship with people struggling for freedom around the world. The jazz ambassadors connected to the world as artists and humans. Jazz simply symbolized the qualities of a vibrant democracy for many people around the world.\textsuperscript{157} Audiences never confused or connected their love of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[152] Ibid., 241.
\item[155] Ibid., 247.
\item[156] Ibid., 251.
\item[157] Ibid., 258.
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jazz and American popular culture with being forced to accept American foreign policy through jazz diplomacy.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 257-258.
Chapter III

ROCK IN THE BLOC

Across more than eight thousand miles of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, from the cusp of the Berlin Wall to the dockyards of Vladivostok, three generations of young socialists, who should have bonded by the liturgy of Marx and Lenin, have instead found common ground in the music of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles.

– Timothy W. Ryback

I believe that rock music is not imperial, not imperialistic. . . . This is a glue . . . . Rock and roll music is universal; it is a universal language. It’s easy to embrace. It speaks to the people. That is why it was so useful and meaningful in penetrating Communist society. Because it was understandable for all the peoples. It was not aristocratic; it belonged to all of us, the man on the street—the little guy who was walking on the streets of Budapest and the little guy who was walking on the streets of Warsaw or Prague. Just like the little guy walking in the streets of New York, Los Angeles or Cleveland . . . . Rock is about freedom, rock is believing in our freedom and the freedom of others.

– András Simonyi

By the 1970s, it became evident that a shift had occurred in the Soviet public’s taste in music. The Communist regime has just gotten used to, and felt it had tamed jazz, when rock and roll took over the music scene. Rock music, like jazz, was an American-born art form. And like jazz, Soviet conservatives tried to outlaw what

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1 Ryback, Rock Around the Bloc, 5.


Premier Nikita Khrushchev called “that noise music,” but eventually came to embrace rock and roll.⁴

**The Sixth World Youth Festival**

As mentioned in Chapter II, thirty thousand people in their twenties and thirties came to Moscow from all over the world to attend the Sixth World Youth Festival in the summer of 1957. Along with the many jazz groups, a few of the early rock and roll groups also performed at the festival. These rock groups, complete with their electric guitars, were the Soviet Union’s introduction to rock and roll.⁵ The more conservative Communists were shocked by the visiting performers’ “bizarre” way of dressing, their “wild” haircuts and their “offensive” music. Some people even wrote to the journal *Soviet Culture*, complaining about the foreigners.⁶ But the music and style of these Western performers won over Soviet youth. Because rock was virtually unknown in the USSR, officials did not know what to expect. Thus, Soviet authorities were surprised when rock music took the festival by storm. Rock historian Timothy W. Ryback writes, “The [Soviet] government’s inability to regulate the musical fare at the Sixth World Youth Festival, highlighted the cultural dilemma that plagued Soviet officials for the next decade.” Jazz ensembles were already thriving in every city in the Soviet bloc—officials were finding it impossible to control the wave of Western music sweeping the Soviet republics. The Komsomol had already accepted jazz as “ideologically


⁵ Ibid., 208.

permissible” in comparison to the new music sensation, rock and roll. In the eyes of these young *apparatchiks* (full-time, professional functionaries of the Communist Party/government) the introduction to rock and roll made jazz the “lesser of two evils.” Indeed, at the festival the Soviets held an official rock concert during which the crowd mobbed the stage requiring dozens of police to step in and maintain order. Although Communists attempted to curtail the wave of rock and roll, as Ryback explains:

> The unifying force among the youth of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union did not emerge from a carefully engineered socialist education: it came though the speaker of a gramophone, blaring the latest boogie woogie or rock and roll . . . . Rock music, despite the claims of Communist leaders, was for Soviet and East European youths, a visceral rather than political experience. The “heated rhythms” of rock and roll elevated them among the mundane; it allowed them to escape, not engage in, political activity.

**Rock Records in the Bloc**

Rock music, even in its birthplace, the United States, was still in its early stages in the mid-1950s. Elvis Presley had his first hits the year prior to the Sixth World Youth Festival. However, Presley’s recordings, along with those of Chubby Checker and Bill Haley, were all available in the Soviet Union. In those early years, rock recordings were not pressed officially in the Soviet Union, and records brought in from other Eastern European countries or the West were expensive. However, Soviets made rock

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7 Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, 76.


9 Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 159-160.

10 Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 12-13; Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc*, 30, 34.

records using x-ray films, just as they had done with jazz. Millions of these records circulated until 1958 when the Soviet regime outlawed them and became stricter in its enforcement of the rule. Despite the Soviet crackdown, recordings of rock and other Western-style music continued to circulate and became even more popular in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{12}

Large “open” Soviet bloc cities, such as Moscow, Warsaw or Kiev, allowed foreign visitors, but “closed” USSR cities, such as the rocket-manufacturing city of Dniepropetrovsk in Ukraine, lacked the foreign tourists who often brought fresh music and information from the West. For instance, during the 1970s, a quarter to half of all new Western music records in Kiev’s black market came directly from foreign visitors; and in port cities like Odessa, nearly half of all Western records were bought by Soviet sailors and fishermen who visited foreign countries on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{13} Vitalii Pidgaetskii, a student and then history professor at Dniepropetrovsk University during the Brezhnev era, said:

Living in the closed city under Brezhnev, we had more restrictions than Muscovites or people from other Soviet open cities had. That is why we worshipped any cultural product that came from the magic West. For us, the West was a kind of symbolic mirror. Looking in this mirror, we tried to invent our own identity and understand what we were living for. To some extent, we constructed ourselves looking in this magic mirror of the forbidden and censored capitalist West.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Richmond, \textit{Cultural Exchange and the Cold War}, 208.

\textsuperscript{13} Zhuk, \textit{Rock and Roll in the Rocket City}, 95.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 303.
It can be said that the mass consumption of Western cultural products in the insular Soviet society contributed to the spread of cynicism among young people.\textsuperscript{15} In the closed city of Dniepropetrovsk, people were ironically getting a lot of the Western things they craved from Moscow, albeit an open city, but also the center of the Soviet world. This irony was probably also realized by people in other closed cities and led to cynicism, thus leading to the eventual failing of the Soviet system.

From 1971 to 1975, \textit{Melodia} (Melody), the state-owned record label, released six small records, thus becoming a source for those consumers who wished to avoid the black market. Melodia would produce compilations of Western music, which included performances by artists such as the Animals, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, Elton John, Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Bee Gees, Deep Purple, Slade, Sweet and T. Rex. All of these Melodia recordings were released without any official permission from the Western record companies, and often did not even reveal the name of the performers or songwriters. The compilations made by Melodia were often the first available sources of music for younger Soviet music fans, like middle school and high school students, who were just beginning to search for recordings of their favorite music.\textsuperscript{16}

By the end of the 1970s there was an entire network of distribution for homemade albums, complete with artwork and lyrics. The cottage industry made actual cassettes that were duplicated and distributed throughout the country. Even Russian-language rock albums were made, which established cultural heroes amongst Soviets.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 317.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 96.
These pioneering Russian rock musicians were indifferent to socialist ideology and their fans were more loyal to them than to establishment artists.¹⁷

**Radio**

Willis Conover’s popular Voice of America program, Music USA, in addition to airing jazz, eventually played other pop music as well. As mentioned in Chapter II, Music USA was heard by more Europeans, Africans and people in the Far East than any other program.¹⁸ Many millions of Conover’s listeners were in the Soviet Union. About the power of his program, Conover said, “. . . this is America. That’s what gives this music validity. It’s a musical reflection of the way things happen in America. We’re not apt to recognize this over here but people in other countries can feel this element of freedom.”¹⁹ VOA also launched Music Today, a program dedicated to rock and pop music. In addition to VOA, those trapped behind the Iron Curtain could get a glimpse of life in the West by listening to Radio Free Europe and Radio Luxembourg. RFE had a pop music program, and although it was an English-language broadcast, it was aired to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. In 1966, RFE conducted a survey amongst their Eastern European teenage listeners’ requests and found that their tastes rarely varied from their American or British counterparts.²⁰ Another popular source of music was a socialist Romanian radio station, which broadcast from

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¹⁷ Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 208-209.

¹⁸ Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 117.

¹⁹ Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 207.

²⁰ Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc*, 86.
Bucharest from 1965 to 1973. Its signal was stronger than that of VOA or BBC, making it easier for people to listen. 21

András Simonyi, the Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S. from 2002 to 2007, was one of many radio listeners behind the Iron Curtain to find hope through rock music. Born in Hungary, the young Simonyi lived in Denmark with his family for five years where he attended an American school and fell for Western music. The diplomat described his experience in a speech he delivered at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio in 2003, titled: “Rocking for the Free World: How Rock Music Helped to Bring Down the Iron Curtain.” 22 Upon returning to Hungary, he found that the music he loved was simply not available in his home country. Simonyi lived with his conservative Communist aunt and uncle for a year. They had a huge problem with him and his brother listening to Western radio stations. As he put it, “That was real tough. And we got to understand very quickly that this Hungary is not very similar to the Denmark where we used to live.” However, it was important to Simonyi to keep up with Western music because, “It kept us sane and kind of made us part of the free world.” Thus, the Simonyi brothers snuck their listening of RFE, VOA and Radio Luxembourg at night, “. . . and as we listened to this radio, as we listened to Radio [Luxembourg], we were suddenly out of our bodies and our soul was part of the free world. We would join our peers in the West.” 23

21 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 97.

22 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”

23 Ibid.
Aleksandr Tatarskii, a journalist, broadcast a special music show called, *Zapishite na vashi magnitofony* (Please make your own tape recordings) from 1968 to 1975 on the Moscow radio station *Maiak* (the Beacon). Usually Tatarskii only was given twenty-five minutes of airtime, but sometimes he managed to broadcast his show for an hour each Sunday. Tatarskii would include the latest musical hits, along with his professional commentary during the program. The radio station’s administration tried to censor him and the music he chose to play, and even shut the show down several times. This censorship caused Tatarskii to move to another Moscow station after 1976. He devoted his new show to jazz and Soviet pop music. Tatarskii and other young radio journalists worked with the central radio station *Yunost’* (Youth) to organize two new radio shows that covered various topics about modern popular music including jazz and rock and roll: *Na vsekh shirotakh* (On all latitudes) and *Muzykal’nyi globus* (Musical globe).24

**Beatlemania**

Soviet officials were unable to catch up with the wave of Western culture influencing their youth. These authorities were essentially forced to modify their anti-Western tastes and accept new forms of cultural consumption for their political and financial survival. Just as they had finally accepted American jazz—rock and roll was introduced to the bloc,25 and it was too late for the Soviet government to have any effect. Rock and roll music in the mid-1960s quickly “became the most important

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25 Ibid., 78.
component of Westernization for an entire way of life, especially for urban youth”;

it shaped the behavior, tastes and ideas of Soviet youth. As one contemporary explained:

. . . rock was readily available [as opposed to Western books and movies] from
the numerous radio stations like Radio Luxembourg or the BBC (the un-
jammed, English-language edition), and we lapped it up with gusto
unimaginable in the West. For Westerners it was music to dance or drop acid to;
for us, when you multiplied the Beatles’ youthful vitality by the forbidden fruit
factor, it was more than a breath of fresh air—it was a hurricane, a release, the
true voice of freedom. We paraphrased Mayakovsky’s line “I’d learn Russian
just because it was spoken by Lenin” to read: “I’d learn English just because it
was spoken by Lennon.”

Officially, rock music was banned by the Soviet regime; however, the Beatles
craze hit the Soviet bloc in the mid-1960s, just as it did everywhere else. The effect
that the Beatles—so influenced by American pop music—had on Western youth is
widely known. Most people have seen the footage of their arrival in the United States
and their subsequent appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. However, it is rare to hear
about the Beatles’ effect on youth in the East, but they, like other rock groups, had a
loyal following behind the Iron Curtain. Even those on the “inside” of the Soviet system
admitted to finding solace in rock and roll music. Pavel Palazchenko, Mikhail
Gorbachev’s English-language interpreter and foreign policy aide, wrote:

We knew [the Beatles’] songs by heart . . . . In the dusky years of the Brezhnev
regime they were not only a source of musical relief. They helped us create a
world of our own, a world different from the dull and senseless ideological
liturgy that increasingly reminded one of Stalinism . . . . The Beatles were our
quiet way of rejecting “the system” while conforming to most of its demands.

26 Ibid., 79.
27 Ibid.
29 Richmond, Cultural Exchange and the Cold War, 205.
Eastern European governments and the Soviet Union recognized that youth preferred rock and roll over socialist cultural activities, and thus officials sought to eliminate rock in Soviet bloc countries. But as is now known, it was a battle they would lose. Throughout the 1970s, rock culture began to be accepted and embraced by not just young people, but also by bloc governments.\(^{30}\)

The music of the Beatles was an entranceway to other Western rock musicians. The Rolling Stones became especially popular among young consumers of new “beat music” recordings. After 1967, any musician with ties to the Beatles sparked the interest of Soviet youth. For instance, rumors of Jimi Hendrix covering “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” made him popular with young Soviet Beatles’ fans. When people caught wind that Eric Clapton played guitar with George Harrison on the Beatles’ White Album track, “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” it triggered an interest in Clapton’s music, especially in his band, Cream. Rumors of friendships between the Beatles musicians and other artists led way to Soviet fans of bands and artists like The Who, Harry Nilsson, Elton John, David Bowie and Badfinger. Popular American rock bands included the Doors, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Simon and Garfunkel and Santana. Soon, rock fans in the USSR began to study English in order to understand their favorite songs. Soviet fans tended to prefer more rhythmic and melodious music, such as the Beatles and Creedence Clearwater Revival as opposed to someone like Bob Dylan. Soviets found Dylan’s music “boring and slow,” and his lyrics difficult to

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 208.
Politically-charged American folk music, such as Dylan and Joan Baez, did not translate well to Soviet audiences, who had different political issues to deal with.

The Komsomol raided the student dormitories in Dniepropetrovsk in 1965. Officials noted that “students demonstrated their apathy toward public life, and understood incorrectly the questions of the contemporary international and domestic situation(s).” But what they found the “most dangerous” was that all student rooms contained capitalist cultural paraphernalia, such as audiotapes of “beat music” and pictures of Western bands, like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In January 1968, the KGB did an analysis of letters written to radio stations to see how the inhabitants of Dniepropetrovsk processed the information they heard on foreign radio stations. They found that an overwhelming majority of the letter writers had no interest in politics—what they were interested in was new music, popular culture and fashion. In fact, KGB censors could not find a single critical anti-Soviet comment—not even an ironic or sarcastic reference to indicate a skeptical attitude toward Soviet values—was found in the letters. All the same, the police noted that Western radio had a negative influence on some of its listeners. Listening led to admiration of the artists and a desire to be like their idols, i.e. free. KGB reports emphasized that Western pop music was a dangerous

31 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 87-89.
32 Ryback, Rock Around the Bloc, 34.
33 Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security), the national security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 until 1991.
34 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 66.
influence on Soviet youth. It provided annual reports to regional committees of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the Ukraine regional report, KGB officials made a clear connection between anti-Soviet behavior and an unhealthy enthusiasm about Western mass culture. And the KGB would know since Western popular music not only affected regular, young, enthusiastic Soviet citizens but also KGB officials and party apparatchiks.35

Zinaida Soumina, an official in the Dniepropetrovsk administrative apparatus, said, “[The youth] still wait when the fresh music records from the West will appear on the city black market. In search for the recordings of their Western idols, young people forget their national roots, their own national culture.”36

During his speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Ambassador Simonyi recalled how in 1969 Stevie Winwood’s band, Traffic, a band he “loved dearly,” came to Budapest. “I had no idea how they got there and it was the strangest thing because I would know all the Traffic tunes by heart, you name it and I could sing it and I try to play it. ‘Mr. Fantasy’ and ‘Medicated Goo,’ or whatever,” he said about the experience. With the help of his father, Simonyi found out which hotel Stevie Winwood and Traffic were staying while in Budapest. Luckily for the young Simonyi, loitering outside of the hotel paid off—Stevie Winwood himself appeared before him, “. . . and it is like, I don’t know, may I say it is like God showing up?” Simonyi struck up a conversation with Winwood and though he apologized and said he had to go, Simonyi offered to be a tour guide for the rest of the group. “So I took Jim Capaldi, the drummer, and Albert, the

35 Ibid., 68.

36 Ibid., 84.
road manager down to Lake Balaton . . . and we hung out for a couple of days. I was very really into something very special, talking to these people. That left a lasting mark on my attitude to music.” While Simonyi was in the U.S. to give the speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003 he found out Winwood was playing a concert in Washington and he went to see it. He was able to meet Winwood again and they started talking about their first meeting thirty-five years before:

He said “Yes, I remember. I didn’t go to the Lake with you because I had to go and listen to some gipsy music.” And I said “Steve, how did you get [to Hungary]?” He said “I don’t know because we didn’t go to any of the other East European Communist countries.” “Can you give me an explanation?” He said “Call Chris Blackwell.” So I called Chris Blackwell, who was then their manager and I asked, “Chris, what the hell was Traffic doing in Hungary?” He said, “Look, I think you had some opening in ‘68 because no one else would take us in but Hungarians were crazy with this music and somehow the authorities allowed this to happen.”

Simonyi created his own band, “We used to play Cream in ’67, ’68 and ’69. I would do Rory Gallagher, I would do some early Fleetwood Mac stuff. It was really very special because I’d always thought this was at the avant-garde of rock music.”

Access to instruments was difficult for Soviet rock musicians because electric guitars were only produced in East Germany and Poland. Simonyi got his guitar from his father when they were living in Denmark. Some unofficial instrument manufacturers were set up in Soviet cities. Despite many efforts by Communist ideologists to promote classical and folk music, Soviet youth preferred music performed by VIAs, vocal instrumental ensembles or vokal’noinstrumental’nyi ansambl’ in Russian, or more

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37 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”

38 Ibid.

simply—Soviet rock bands. While rock music was still officially banned, an underground culture formed featuring Soviet bands such as Eagle, the Guys, the Little Red Devils, the Scythians and the Melomanes. According to S. Frederick Starr, “The world of rock encouraged ‘social deviance’ as an end itself.” The purposeful deviance and outright rebellion of Soviet youth grew as time went on. New rock bands appeared in scores all over the Soviet bloc each year. One such band was called Wings of Change and was led by Sasha Lehrman who said, “We were political by being unpolitical.”

Members of the growing group of Western culture consumers consistently aligned themselves with their favorite music, which they regularly altered and personalized instead of simply imitating. To illustrate, Soviet rock bands took to essentially rewriting rock songs from their original English lyrics to their native language—be it Russian or Ukrainian or Hungarian—to make the songs meaningful to them. A band from Leningrad, Poiushchie gitary (Singing guitars) covered “Yellow River” by the American band the New Christian Minstrels, with Russian lyrics about Karlsson, a funny character from a Swedish fairy tale. A band from Moscow, Vesiolye rebiate (Funny guys/Merry Lads) covered the Beatles’ song “Drive My Car” with Russian lyrics about a “small old car.” Even still, the original Western, English-

40 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 86.
42 Ibid.
43 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 94.
44 Ibid., 91.
language recordings were the preferred versions of Soviets’ favorite rock songs.\footnote{Ibid., 93.}

Through their changes they made Western music their own. However, Soviet ideologists’ officially sanctioned music, although similar to the Western versions, was rejected by Soviet bands and fans; they wanted to make their own choices about music. And the choices that they would make would affect the formation of their identity.\footnote{Ibid., 94.}

This desire to make a simple choice alone—and not be told by the government what to do—was a small step leading to the demise of the Soviet Union.

The Komsomol publication, \textit{Rovesnik} (literally, “person of the same age”), shared the ambiguous feelings of Soviet ideologists concerning this new cultural phenomenon after 1964. On one hand, they considered rock music to be a product of capitalist culture and therefore harmful to the Soviet system. On the other hand, they recognized that rock music was part of a social protest of sorts from the working class in the West against their capitalist establishment. This double-edged sword created confusion over how to officially handle rock music in the Soviet bloc.\footnote{Ibid., 242.}

The combination of tremendous public demand and incompetent official opposition allowed rock music to develop a complex and efficient organizational network in the Soviet bloc. At the center of this network was a group of private entrepreneurs, who formed bands, booked concerts and accumulated large sums of money in the process. Some of these promoters were also musicians. The quintessential Soviet rock entrepreneur was an Armenian named Rafail Mkrtchian. Mkrtchian had
some pretty murky dealings with the Komsomol and through those efforts he talked the young Communist officials into lending their organization’s name to the annual Festival of Rock Music, the first of which was held in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, in 1969. The event took place for several years and became known as the “Soviet Woodstock.” It was annually attended by 5,000-8,000 people daily over the course of several weekends. Each winter, Mkrtchian would scour all of the Soviet Union for the best bands and personally invite them to play at the festival in May. Locally, the festival was advertised on billboards, but elsewhere in the Soviet world, people heard through word of mouth. Bands came and performed from all over the bloc and were protected from Soviet censors by Mkrtchian.48

**The 1970s: Decade of Change and Gradual Acceptance**

The 1970s was a decade of change regarding the status of rock music in the Soviet Union. In 1970 the State Department sent Blood, Sweat and Tears to Yugoslavia, Romania and Poland. Sending a rock group on an official tour was a marked change in policy, but the U.S. felt that, like jazz, rock had become “an international symbol of rebellion.” The State Department said that the cultural impact of the Blood, Sweat and Tears tour was “positively meaningful, as their music established immediate contact with the young and music lovers.” Like the jazz groups that went on official State Department tours, Blood, Sweat and Tears played in jam sessions with local musicians.

48 Mkrtchian failed to share enough of his profits with Armenian officials and was jailed for 10 years; Starr, “The Rock Inundation,” 63-64.
musicians. In 1975, the signing of the Helsinki Accords allowed more Western groups to tour the Soviet Union. That year, the Joffrey Ballet, of New York, and a small rock group called the Vegetables toured the USSR. The following year, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band performed its blend of rock and country music on their cross-country tour.

The growing popularity of heavy metal amongst Soviets helped to break down class barriers. The broad appeal of the sub-genre contributed to the democratization of Western pop music consumption among Soviet youth. Prior to the early 1970s, the consumption of jazz, “beat music” and rock and roll was actually considered elitist. In the first half of the decade, the musical taste and audience in the bloc appeared to be changing. Up until 1975, Soviet rock consumers were predominantly from the middle- and upper-middle classes, but after 1975, a new generation of pop music consumers emerged, such as people from lower-working-class families. One reason for this was that the major characteristic of hard rock and heavy metal music was that the “look” of

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50 The Helsinki Accords were signed in the summer of 1975 by thirty-five states, including the U.S., Canada and most European nations, in an attempt to improve relations between the Communist bloc and the West during the Cold War; Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 43, 138, 209.

51 Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 208-209.


53 Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*, 175.

54 Ibid., 171.

55 Ibid., 175-176.
heavy metal—long hair, denim jacket and jeans—“came to acquire connotations of low socioeconomic position,” according to Will Straw, a music sociologist.56 But by the end of the Brezhnev era, millions of young people from working-class families and students at vocational schools joined college students in favoring the new, loud and aggressive hard rock music (eventually deemed “heavy metal” in the 1980s).57 Many contemporaries contributed this shift in music taste to the influx of youth moving from rural villages to cities. Often, these young migrants would abandon much of their rural identities and adopt elements of urban popular youth culture, such as wearing American jeans, growing their hair long and dancing to new music—particularly hard rock and disco.58 Thousands of boys and girls at vocational schools bought audiotapes of hard rock music because they loved to dance to it. In addition to Beatles melodies, this new generation of consumers discovered they enjoyed the heavier and more aggressive music of Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, and the less heavy music of Paul McCartney’s band, Wings, which they felt was good for dancing.59 According to Soviet jazz musician Aleksei Kozlov, “It is noteworthy that such music was popular among all the dance floor guests in Moscow. Deep Purple’s music united both the intellectual students and

56 Ibid., 175.
57 Ibid., 171.
58 Ibid., 176.
59 Ibid., 171.
the uneducated working-class youth from the Moscow region, who were called ‘bumpkins.’”

The dance floor was influential in shaping the musical tastes of the vast majority of those who listened to popular music in the 1970s. Catchy and energetic melodies of bands such as Queen, Slade, Garry Glitter and Sweet were popular at first. Then tastes shifted to the “more sophisticated” and longer compositions of “intellectual” rock bands such as King Crimson, Emerson Lake and Palmer, Yes, Pink Floyd, Genesis and Jethro Tull at dance parties. Dance audiences also included various ballads in their repertoires to be played for slow dancing.

Rock music fans in open Soviet cities were more fortunate in that they had the opportunity to see live performances by their favorite Western musicians or at least substitutes from socialist countries. But in closed cities like Dniepropetrovsk there was no such opportunity. One contemporary, Mikhail Suvorov, who was in high school in 1970s Dniepropetrovsk, said, “We wanted to see our ‘rock idols’ alive, not just listen to their music! We were envious of Polish kids who had an opportunity to watch the Beatles movies in Warsaw . . . We wanted to see the real Western rock band alive on the movie screen in our hometown, Dniepropetrovsk!”

By the late 1970s, the Soviet bureaucracy had accepted rock music as an unavoidable social reality. Officially sponsored rock music festivals were held in various parts of the bloc. Oleksii F. Vatchencko, the first secretary of the

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60 Ibid., 173.
61 Ibid., 179.
62 Ibid., 252-253.
Dniepropetrovsk regional committee of the Communist Party, delivered a speech at the annual conference of the regional Komsomol organization on March 4, 1972. He said:

... it is impossible to stay indifferent to the various perversions in the student society about fashion, music and arts. What we see [on the dance floor]—untidy appearance, extremely long hair among certain boys, beards that look like they were borrowed from the pages of foreign magazines—all this does not fit an image of the Soviet young man. This influence of alien morals is a result of a blind imitation of bourgeois fashions that Komsomol organizations do not repulse. As a matter of fact, our dance floors... now popularize the morality and manners which are alien to Soviet culture. They engage in propaganda of trashy foreign music... Remember that this kind of entertainment could lead other young men to other, more dangerous, displays of [anti-Soviet] behavior, such as political indifference, skepticism, neglect of the Soviet duties... We need to find new forms of work for our youth. We must cultivate a love of real art and good music. If we bring this good music to the dance floor as well, we will eventually decrease the influence and number of spreaders of music records and tapes with trashy and degenerate Western music among the young audience.63

Hence, Communist officials were fully aware that Western music was swaying the youth in a direction the government did not approve.

Millions of young Soviet consumers were deeply affected by the West during the process of forming their identities and searched for authentic Western cultural products—not Soviet substitutions—to do so. By the end of the 1970s, consumers in Dniepropetrovsk, who were trying to identify themselves with the West, had by then lost any connection with “official” Soviet Ukrainian culture, which reflected a conservative anti-Western worldview. “Only idiots and peasants listen to Ukrainian estrada [pop music], the normal razvitye [smart, intelligent] people listen to real rock

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63 Ibid., 181.
music from the real West,” wrote Andrei Vadimov, a future activist of the discotheque movement in the city of Dniepropetrovsk, in September 1976.\textsuperscript{64}

In 1979 B.B. King did a tour of the Soviet bloc that was not publicized ahead of time. Regardless of this oversight, his appearance in Tbilisi was overflowing with fans willing to sit two people per seat in the theater.\textsuperscript{65} That same year, Elton John was invited to perform in Moscow. He was asked by Soviet officials to delete the Beatles’ song, “Back in the USSR,” from his set list. However, during his encore he played the song anyway and a riot nearly ensued.\textsuperscript{66} Rock was now woven into the fabric of Soviet society and nothing could change that. Subsequently, the freedom that rock music exuded was now deep-set in the hearts and minds of its Soviet fans.

\textbf{Disco Fever}

In 1972, Artemy Troitsky and his friend, Aleksandr Kostenko, organized the first “typical” Soviet discotheque in Moscow. Troisky rented equipment from some musician friends in order to operate this “dancing enterprise” inside a café at Moscow University. The team organized the event in a specially developed program that later became a model for other Soviet discos. “The first hour was dedicated to listening; that is, I played music by ‘serious’ groups like Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd, King Crimson and talked about their histories,” said Troitsky. After this listening hour, people danced for

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 263.


\textsuperscript{66} Richmond, \textit{Cultural Exchange and the Cold War}, 208-209.
the next three hours. The Komsomol had tried to use a similar format as early as 1966 at different youth clubs in Soviet cities. To some degree, Troitsky and his friends transformed traditional Soviet music propaganda into a new form of musical entertainment, imitating Western forms and fashions. These night spots became part of the official Komsomol ideological campaign as a new form of youth entertainment by 1975. In October 1976, the first Soviet disco clubs combined music, light shows and Communist propaganda in an attempt to appease the ideological watchdogs without alienating youthful audiences, according to Timothy W. Ryback.

Initially, in 1975 and 1976, the Komsomol got involved in the discotheque movement to provide it with a socialist character. It attempted to control and regulate the consumption of Western music by incorporating elements of Communist indoctrination, but the results were not what it anticipated. The Komsomol ended up just becoming part of the profitable disco club business, which had nothing to do with the Marxist-Leninist theory of cultural enlightenment and Communist indoctrination. Indeed, by the end of 1978, cities across the Soviet bloc had multiple disco clubs—Moscow had registered 187 Komsomol-sponsored discotheques; Latvia had more than three hundred different kinds of disco clubs; and Ukraine had forty-two. A typical Soviet disco provided flashing lights, mirrored walls and, of course, Western disco

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68 Ibid., 215-216.
69 Ibid., 219.
70 Ibid., 238.
music.\textsuperscript{71} Just as the Soviets had done with jazz clubs they found themselves co-opting disco clubs in an attempt to maintain control over the lives of their citizens.

**Larger Cracks in the Curtain**

In the summer of 1986 during their Magic Tour, the rock band, Queen, played across Europe beginning in Stockholm in June, and went on to play twenty-six dates including stops in Vienna, Fréjus (France) and Budapest. They played for over a million people total. Hungarian fans were thrilled about the performance, especially when band members, Freddie Mercury and Brian May, played the Hungarian folksong, “*Tavaszi Szél Vizet Áraszt*” (“Spring Wind Floods Water”), which particularly moved the crowd. Mercury said after the experience that he was “over the moon,” and May said that it was the band’s “most challenging and exhilarating gig.”\textsuperscript{72}

In 1987, Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa, met with Yoko Ono, the widow of Beatle John Lennon, and Mrs. Gorbachev told Ono that she and her husband were fans of Ono’s late husband’s band.\textsuperscript{73} In fact, Gorbachev’s endorsement of rock music ended decades of official—but sometimes superficial—anti-rock policy in the Soviet Union. In the second half of the 1980s his *glasnost* (openness) policy called for increased transparency in government institutions and activities in the Soviet Union. During this time, rock groups in the USSR emerged from the underground.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 219.


\textsuperscript{73} Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, 205.
Conservative Communists saw this as a Western attempt to undermine the Soviet Union through its youth. “Today you listen to rock,” the conservatives challenged, “and tomorrow you will betray your motherland.” But under Gorbachev, the once condemned form of music blossomed in the Soviet Union. Serge Levin, a Russian, described his personal view on the role of rock and roll in the early 1980s:

Rock’n roll was the main factor that brought down the Communist regime. It was the cultural dynamite that blew up the Iron Curtain. People were bringing Western records from abroad, and they could be bought on the black market. Not everyone could afford them, but everyone had a tape recorder, so young people duplicated those records like crazy. And I’m telling you, the smell of freedom radiated by that music had a profound effect on myself and thousands, maybe millions of young people in my country. Very few knew what the songs were about in terms of lyrics, but everyone could feel the energy and was able to figure it out by themselves. So the music was the main factor in “Westernization” of the Russian people, at least of my generation.

In 1988, Amnesty International sponsored the six-week, five-continent, Human Rights Now concert tour, featuring artists like Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel and Tracy Chapman. The tour, which began in London and ended in Buenos Aires, also made a stop in Budapest, where future-ambassador Simonyi was in the audience:

Just imagine the powerful message of Bruce Springsteen singing “Born in the USA” at the stadium in Budapest and 80,000 Hungarian kids roaring and saying, yes, we’re together. That year when I was 100 percent convinced that [Communism would] be over soon. My friends in the West reacted in disbelief,

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 206.

but I was right. What stronger message than the message that came through rock music can you imagine?77

**After the Fall**

Western rock culture debunked Communist assumptions that the state had the ability to control its citizens. As Timothy W. Ryback asserts, it was a visceral rather than political experience for people, contrary to the professed beliefs of Communist leaders. It allowed people to escape from rather than engage in political activity.78 As Yale Richmond, a U.S. cultural officer during the Cold War put it, “Rock taught Russians [and others in the Soviet bloc] to speak more freely, to express their innermost thoughts . . .” Rock and roll, therefore, can be seen as another reason for the collapse of Communism.79

About the power of rock music, András Simonyi said:

> So while the authorities tried to limit through the propaganda machinery . . . there was no way to stop the onslaught of the message of freedom through rock and roll. That was the most powerful instrument to convey the message to my generation about the free world. I do believe today, what the satellite and VHS was for the 80s and what the Internet is today, was rock and roll music in the 60s and the early 70s. It was about sending a strong message of freedom through the Berlin Wall to us who were living behind the Iron Curtain . . . . I believe that rock music is not imperial, not imperialistic. Mozart used to belong to the Austrians. Does anyone ask anywhere in the world—in China, in the United States, in Brazil, in Moscow—where Mozart came from? You couldn’t care less. The music that Traffic played, that Cream played, that Jimmy Hendrix played, that “Skunk” Baxter played belongs not to the United States or to the UK any longer—it belongs to all of us . . . . Rock music is universal; it is a universal language. It’s easy to embrace. It speaks to the people. That is why it was so useful and meaningful in penetrating Communist society. Because it was

77 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”

78 Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc*, 5, 34.

understandable for all the peoples. It was not aristocratic, it belonged to all of us, the man on the street—the little guy who was walking on the streets of Budapest and the little guy who was walking on the streets of Warsaw or Prague. Just like the little guy walking in the streets of New York, Los Angeles or Cleveland . . . . Rock is about freedom, rock is believing in our freedom and the freedom of others.  

At the height of their fame, the Rolling Stones were unable to play in the Soviet Union, but they eventually made it to Moscow in 1998. A sports stadium was filled with fifty thousand cheering Russian fans, most of who were in their thirties and forties. These people had waited decades to see their favorite band play live in their country. And in 2000, the industrial city of Chelyabinsk in the Ural Mountains voted to rename a street after John Lennon. These instances further illustrate how powerful and important rock music was and remains in the hearts and minds of people who grew up and lived under Soviet control.

Rock and roll music did two things simultaneously that helped lead to the fall of the Iron Curtain. First, rock created a sense of community amongst its Soviet fans—not just with one another, but with their counterparts in the West as well. According to Simon Frith, popular music culture specialist, former rock critic and current Tovey chair of music at University of Edinburgh, “The experience of pop music is an experience of identity: In responding to a song, people are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with performers and with the performers’ other fans . . . . [Therefore] music symbolizes and offers the immediate experience of collective identity.”

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80 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”

81 Richmond, Practicing Public Diplomacy, 209.

82 Zhuk, Rock and Roll in the Rocket City, 93.
helped to frame Soviets’ sense of identity through the direct experiences it offered, enabling people to place themselves in imaginative cultural narratives—in other words, it allowed them to escape. By listening to rock music from the West, Soviets were able to nurture the hope that one day they too would be free. 

Young rock music fans rejected the official Soviet version of their ethnic identity and assumed the West as a part of their identity. This affected Komsomol ideologists since they eagerly consumed Western cultural products as well and therefore went through the process of forming their identity with influences from the West with the rest of their peers. Despite their official stance on “the corrupting influences of the capitalist West,” these apparatchiks also preferred the purely Western cultural products to the made up Soviet ones.

**Rock = Freedom**

About rock and roll music, András Simonyi said, “You have kept millions going. You have kept millions and millions hoping. You have warmed the hearts of millions of people behind the Iron Curtain, it went through the Berlin Wall. It was a bridge.”

The music was not just a bridge connecting West to East, but also East to East. Rock fans in the Soviet bloc helped each other by dispersing the music to fellow fans, whether it was recording the music off their own radio and duplicating it, or copying records they received from travelling sailors or foreign tourists. And when people are united in a common goal, they can get a lot more accomplished together than individually.

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83 Ibid.

84 Ibid, 263.

85 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”
CONCLUSION

The Cold War, the decades-long ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, was fought more in the realm of perceptions than on the battlefield. Therefore, the U.S. government’s decision to use propaganda during this conflict was an important element in the struggle. It was not the first time the U.S. used propaganda during wartime, indeed it and can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence which jump-started its revolution for freedom from Great Britain. Prior to the Cold War, the U.S. used propaganda in World War I and II. While Americans used propaganda reluctantly they realized it could be a valuable diplomatic tool, despite the difficulty in quantifying its exact results.

In order to demonstrate the positive aspects and advantages of the American system during the Cold War, the United States had to show the Soviets—and the world—the ace up its sleeve. Aware that overly aggressive propaganda could backfire and of the generally negative view of propaganda associated with totalitarian regimes, the U.S. government knew that it could not only use overt, hardcore messages to demonstrate America’s deeply-held values regarding the dignity of man and the rights of the individual. The messaging needed to be subtle, so the evolutionary concept of gradual cultural infiltration was chosen.

But what was American culture? What was inherently American? Jazz. The VOA music programs and the State Department-sponsored jazz tours were among the first important windows Soviet citizens had to the West. Soon there were cracks in the Iron Curtain. The cracks allowed rock and roll music—another American art form
evolved from jazz—to slip through almost undetected, and before Soviet officials knew it—their citizens were singing Western songs, wearing Western clothes and identifying with their peers in the West. And even though these Soviet people might not care much for politics, they knew they wanted to be free to listen to whatever they wanted and behave however they wanted.

However, the cultural infiltration used by the American government was not without its ironies. First of all, U.S. officials were never quite clear whether the mission of the cultural programs they arranged were a means of mutual understanding or weapons to win the war with Soviet Communists.

As an example of one of these ironies, Willis Conover, “the single most influential ambassador of American jazz in the USSR and Eastern Europe,”¹ was never a full-time employee of VOA and therefore of the U.S. government, yet his voice is the one associated with freedom in Communist countries abroad during the Cold War.

In addition, one must remember that the State Department was sending many black musicians abroad to promote freedom and the virtues of the American way of life while they were fighting for their own civil rights at home in the States. This irony is explored deeper in Penny M. Von Eschen’s book, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*² and in Lisa E. Davenport’s *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America Abroad in the Cold War Era*.³ Davenport asserts, “As the United


² Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.

³ Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy*. 

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States propelled jazz into new international arenas, jazz diplomacy transformed relations between nations and created a bold Cold War paradox: the cultural expression of one of the nation’s most oppressed minorities came to symbolize the cultural superiority of American democracy.”

Von Eschen also notes:

... musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington embraced the tours as opportunities to make claims on a nation that had long denied them recognition as artists, and humans and civil rights as African Americans... For these musicians, jazz was an international and hybrid music combining not just African and European forms, but forms that had developed out of an earlier mode of cultural exchange, through the circuitous routes of the Atlantic slave trade and the “overlapping diasporas” created by migrations throughout the Americas. And if the U.S. State Department had facilitated the music’s transnational routes of innovation and improvisation, for many musicians there was a certain poetic justice in that.

Furthermore, many of the Soviet worries about how the music would affect its youth echoed similar worries in the United States. Think about how concerned the American public was about Elvis Presley’s hips and how much of his body they would put on the television screen. When Presley appeared on The Milton Berle Show on June 5, 1956, his pelvic thrusts caused television critics across the country to slam the performance for its “appalling lack of musicality,” “vulgarity” and “animalism.” The Catholic Church even got involved by criticizing the King in a piece headlined: “Beware Elvis Presley.” Concerns about juvenile delinquency and the changing moral values of the young targeted the popular singer in his heyday. These sharp criticisms in

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4 Ibid., 5.

5 Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 250.

the U.S. of “unconventional” popular American music echo the worries of conservative Soviet officials that jazz and rock and roll would corrupt the younger generation.

Despite these ironies, no one can deny an alternative lifestyle was provided by jazz and rock and roll to those behind the Iron Curtain, and in the U.S. as well. America, however, could withstand cultural change without its political system collapsing. In the Soviet bloc the allure of American consumer culture could be resisted for only so long, and consumer capitalism ultimately triumphed over state socialism. Since the Wall came down, there has been an overwhelming interest in the role culture played in American foreign policy during the Cold War. It has become common to hear that the Cold War was won by “blue jeans and jazz.” Aspects of American culture were obviously attractive, if not seductive, for many people trapped behind the Iron Curtain.7

More recently, in September of 2012 while accepting the Maria Fisher Founder’s Award from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright remarked about the success of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War:

Jazz entered [my life] in a very different way. As somebody who had always studied diplomacy, I could see what jazz did during Cold War. There was no question that Louis Armstrong and others going to the Soviet Union and other places had a real impact.

I was born in Czechoslovakia. I used to go back in the 1980s, under auspices of the United States Information Agency, when I was a university professor. In that stage, during the Cold War, there was a group that had started as musicians and then became a political movement, called the Jazz Section. During one trip, around ’86, the people at our embassy arranged for me to meet the guy who was the head of it. It was the only sort of cloak-and-dagger thing I ever did. The embassy told me to go to a particular square in Prague. They told me, “Stand in front of this big wooden door and a man in a raincoat will come

up to meet you. He will take you where you’re supposed to go.” So the man came up to me. We got on the metro in Prague and he took me to the Jazz Section headquarters. Both jazz and rock-and-roll were potent symbols there. I visibly saw the role of American music, jazz specifically, in terms of revolting against the regime. It was a way of expressing support and wanting to be part of the West without going out there and marching.8

Even if the U.S. government was unclear about whether its goal was to create mutual understanding or use culture as a weapon, the musicians employed in its Cold War pursuits did eventually shape a mutual understanding with those behind the Iron Curtain. Culture was ultimately a gentle, non-lethal weapon of the Cold War. As Von Eschen concludes in her book, “. . . we can recognize the importance of the creativity of musicians, poets, and artists in crafting humane and just relationships to the world.”9 In his speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003, András Simonyi, then-Hungarian Ambassador to the United States, said:

The other question I got yesterday is, “Do you really think that rock and roll brought down the Iron Curtain?” And I said no, I don’t because the Iron Curtain was pulled down by efforts on both sides, government and people on your side and people trying to influence things on our side. But I do believe that rock and roll played a key role . . . diplomacy, is not made by diplomats, it’s made by people. Successful diplomacy is about people.10

Ambassador Simonyi is right. It was not just the music. However, as he also said, the music was a bridge. The music allowed those behind the Iron Curtain to escape, it allowed them to hope and continue to hope, that one day the Wall would come down, that they too could live in a free, democratic country. The music bonded Soviet fans to their American peers creating a collective identity where they were one entity. The

8 Albright, Interview.


10 Simonyi, “Rocking for the Free World.”
bridge the music created allowed Soviet citizens to slowly breach the Wall. They wanted Western records of their favorite Western artists and bands, they then wanted to dress and talk and act like their idols and soon they wanted to be free like their idols in the West. Eventually, the American tactic of gradual cultural infiltration worked, because people crossed the bridge—and brought down the Iron Curtain.
APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1776  Declaration of Independence is America’s first use of propaganda.

1914  World War I breaks out in Europe.

1917  United States enters World War I.

President Woodrow Wilson establishes the Committee on Public Information (CPI) to educate people about the war in order to gain and keep allies.

Russian Revolution begins.

1918  World War I ends.

1922  Soviet Union is officially established.

1937-1942  Institute for Propaganda Analysis formed in the U.S. to warn people on what it deemed to be the dangers of propaganda.

1938  The State Department creates the Division of Cultural Relations to increase cultural contacts with Latin America and to insulate the region culturally from the rise of fascism stemming from Germany and Italy.

1939  World War II begins in Europe.

1940  President Franklin D. Roosevelt names Nelson Rockefeller as the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), which is charged with radio broadcasting to Central and South America.

1941  Robert Sherwood named director of the new Foreign Information Service (FIS), part of the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI), Voice of America’s first parent organization.

United States enters World War II.

1942  First Voice of America broadcast on February 25.

President Roosevelt creates the Office of War Information (OWI) to produce propaganda for the war effort.

VOA becomes part of OWI in the summer.
1944  The State Department begins circulating *Amerika* magazine in Eastern Europe featuring reprints of articles from U.S. publications.

1945  World War II ends.

In August President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9608 abolishing OWI. Part of the information activities are placed in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), under the jurisdiction of the Interim International Information Service (IIIS) in the State Department. VOA is put in the State Department temporarily.

In October William Benton, secretary of state for public affairs, testifies before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on behalf of legislation to authorize international information and cultural activities.

1946  Winston Churchill declares that an “Iron Curtain” has descended across Europe.

Fulbright educational exchange program is established.


1947  VOA’s Russian Service launches on February 17.

1948  Bipartisan cooperation in Congress leads to the passage of the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act or Smith-Mundt Act in January.

1950  The State Department does an internal analysis of radio programming in the fall that emphasizes the extent to which VOA has become almost exclusively a Cold War tool.

1951  NSC 114/2 endorses an agenda of psychological warfare, which would include efforts to promote the “ultimate liberation and identification with the free world” of the Soviet bloc.

1952  VOA begins airing Jazz Club USA, hosted by Leonard Feather, a jazz pianist, composer, producer and music journalist.

1953  President Dwight D. Eisenhower establishes the United States Information Agency (USIA) in August.

Joseph Stalin dies.
1954  President Eisenhower calls for the creation of a worldwide cultural exchange program for the performing arts allowing American cultural tours in the Soviet bloc for the first time.

1955  Performances of *Porgy and Bess* by an American company are splendidly received in Leningrad and Moscow.

Music USA, hosted by Willis Conover, is launched on VOA over shortwave radio on January 6.

Louis Armstrong is dubbed “Ambassador Satch.”

Vietnam War breaks out.

The Kremlin lifts its ban on listening to Western music at the end of the year.

1956  At the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February, Premier Nikita Khrushchev attacks his predecessor and calls for increased contact with the West.

Performances by violinist Isaac Stern, tenor Jan Peerce and the Boston Symphony Orchestra enjoy positive receptions in the USSR.

Dizzy Gillespie becomes the first jazz musician to do an official tour for the U.S. government when he travels to the Middle East to perform.

Elvis Presley has his first hits in the United States.

National Security Council policy statement 5607, “East-West Exchanges,” sets forth the objective of the U.S. government’s policy to open the Soviet Union to Western influences in order to change its foreign and domestic policies. Policy serves as the basis for East-West exchanges through the 1970s.

The governments of the U.S. and USSR meet in Geneva and sign an agreement on October 9 to peacefully coexist.

1957  Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus orders the National Guard to block African American students from entering Central High School in Little Rock prompting Louis Armstrong to say that “the Government can go to hell,” for treating “his people” is such a manner. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles tells Attorney General Herbert Brownell that the Little Rock situation is “ruining our foreign policy.”

The Sixth World Youth Festival is held in Moscow in the summer and introduces young Soviets to rock and roll. The unprecedented Soviet exposure to
Western goods and ideals leaves a permanent cultural imprint on the younger generation in the USSR.

The Eisenhower administration declares the need to defend the Middle East against the aggression of states controlled by international Communism.

USSR launches Sputnik.

1958 U.S.-Soviet cultural agreement increases U.S. cultural exchanges with the USSR.

The State Department begins collaborating with George Wein, a jazz producer who works with the Newport Jazz Festival, and his colleague, Robert Jones, to facilitate jazz tours to the Eastern Bloc.

The Dave Brubeck Quartet is sent to East Germany, Poland, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Middle East on an official State Department sponsored tour.

Soviets outlaw rock recordings.

1959 The United States and the Soviet Union extend their 1958 cultural agreement.

1960-1961 Louis Armstrong does an official tour of Africa for the State Department.

1961 Komsomolskaya, the official newspaper of Soviet youth, proposes a nationwide network of jazz nightclubs.

The Michigan University Symphonic Band does an official tour to the Soviet bloc, including Baltic cities.

Construction of Berlin Wall begins, separating West Berlin from the Soviet-controlled East Berlin.

1962 Benny Goodman and his band become the first group to tour the Soviet Union for the State Department in May.

Cuban Missile Crisis.

1963 In August the Duke Ellington Orchestra leaves for the first of many State Department sponsored tours. For three months it tours the Middle East, but is cut short after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22.

1963- The Communist Party renews an edict in the winter of 1963 against jazz. The
1964  following spring, Khrushchev succumbs to pressure for freer expression and lets the edict go. Soviets even stop jamming VOA.

1964  Beatlemania.

1965  The Komsomol raids student dormitories in Dniepropetrovsk (Ukraine). Officials find “capitalist cultural paraphernalia, such as audiotapes of ‘beat music’ and pictures of Western bands, like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones” most dangerous.

1965-1973  Socialist Romanian radio station, broadcast from Bucharest, becomes a source for popular music in the Soviet bloc.

1966  The Soviet Union expresses its opposition to U.S. policy in Vietnam by thwarting cultural interactions. It refuses to accept the number of American groups previously specified in an exchange agreement. A resolution is finally reached in March.

The Earl Hines Quartet becomes the second group to tour the Soviet Union for the U.S. government.

Louis Armstrong appears on Soviet television for the first time as a guest on Evening Meeting where he performs “Mack the Knife.”

Radio Free Europe conducts a survey amongst their Eastern European teenage listeners’ requests and finds that their tastes vary little from their American or British counterparts.

1968  The KGB does an analysis of letters written to radio stations to see how citizens of Dniepropetrovsk process the information they hear on foreign radio stations. It finds that an overwhelming majority of the letter writers have no interest in politics.

1968-1973  Aleksandr Tatarskii, a journalist, broadcasts a special music show called, Zapishite na vashi magnitofony (Please make your own tape recordings) on the Moscow radio station Maiak (the Beacon).

1969  Stevie Winwood’s band, Traffic, performs a concert in Budapest, where a young future Hungarian Ambassador, András Simonyi is in the audience. He later meets Winwood and his band.

Armenian Rafail Mkrtchian convinces the Komsomol to lend their organization’s name to the first annual Festival of Rock Music, held in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. This became known as “Soviet Woodstock.”
1970 Alvin Ailey tours the Soviet Union for the State Department.

The State Department’s picks up Newport Jazz acts, Dave Brubeck and Earl Hines, for performances, while they are touring Europe in October. Brubeck, Hines and their bands travel to Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia. Hines is joined by fellow jazz musicians, Charles Mingus and Anita O’Day, in Belgrade.

The State Department sends Blood, Sweat and Tears to Yugoslavia, Romania and Poland.

1971 Vibraphonist Lionel Hampton does State Department-sponsored concerts in Warsaw, Budapest and Bucharest in April.

Louis Armstrong dies in July.

The State Department and Newport Jazz Festival hold the “American Jazz Week in Eastern Europe.”

Duke Ellington tours the Soviet Union for the State Department.

1971-1975 Melodia, the Soviet record label, releases six small records, becoming a source for those consumers who wish to avoid the black market.

1972 Artemy Troitsky and Aleksandr Kostenko, organize the first “typical” Soviet discotheque in Moscow.


1974 Duke Ellington dies in May.

From October 23 to November 16 roving Newport Festival tours Eastern Europe.

1975 The signing of the Helsinki Accords allows more Western groups to tour the Soviet Union.

The State Department and Newport sponsor the Charles Mingus Sextet in Hungary and Romania, Sarah Vaughan and Trio in Poland and the New York Repertory paying homage to Louis Armstrong.

The Joffrey Ballet of New York and a small rock group called the Vegetables tour the USSR.
Rock music becomes more available and more appealing to lower classes in the Soviet Union.


The Komsomol gets involved in the discotheque movement to provide it with a socialist character.

1976 Festival Productions produces Newport programs in Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Portugal.

Aleksandr Tatarskii moves to a new radio station in Moscow and dedicates his programming to pop music.

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band performs its blend of rock and country music on its tour of the USSR.

1978 Clark Terry and his Jolly Giants perform in Cairo, Alexandria, Athens, Istanbul, Ankara, Kabul, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Karachi, Lahore, Calcutta and New Delhi from January 23 to February 26, and are the last scheduled official State Department jazz tour.

Cultural presentations move out of the hands of the State Department and into a reorganized USIA.

1979 B.B. King tours the Soviet bloc.

Elton John is invited to perform in Moscow.

1986 Queen plays a concert in Budapest.

1987 Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa, meet with Yoko Ono, the widow of Beatle John Lennon, and tell her how they are fans of her late husband’s band. Gorbachev’s endorsement of rock music and his glasnost policy ends decades of official anti-rock policy in the Soviet Union.

1988 Amnesty International sponsors a six-week, five-continent, Human Rights Now concert tour, featuring artists like Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel and Tracy Chapman.

1989 Berlin Wall comes down.

1991 Soviet Union collapses.
1993  Congress passes a resolution saluting VOA emcee Willis Conover.

1996  Willis Conover dies in May.

1998  Rolling Stones play in the Soviet Union for the first time.

2000  City of Chelyabinsk in the Ural Mountains vote to rename a street after John Lennon.

2002-2007  András Simonyi serves as the Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S.

2003  Ambassador Simonyi delivers speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio: “Rocking for the Free World: How Rock Music Helped to Bring Down the Iron Curtain.”
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