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ВІД ЕКСПОРТУ КУЛЬТУРИ ДО КУЛЬТУРНОГО ОБМІНУ: «ГОДИНА ДЖАЗУ» ВІЛЛІСА КОНОВЕРА

Розглянуто приклад використання джазу в політичних цілях під час глобального протистояння капіталізму і соціалізму в 50 – 60-х рр. ХХ ст. Особливу увагу приділено особистості харизматичного радіожурналіста і модератора Вілліса Коновера та його програмі «Music USA — Jazz Hour». Описано причини безпрецедентного успіху цієї програми в країнах радянського блоку. Хоча передачі Коновера не призвели до дестабілізації комуністичної системи, вони сприяли популяризації американського джазу і розвитку культурних контактів між Заходом і Сходом.

Ключові слова: джазова дипломатія, «холодна війна», культурні контакти, музичні радіопередачі, ведучий радіопрограми, інтернаціоналізація джазу.

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ОТ ЭКСПОРТА КУЛЬТУРЫ К КУЛЬТУРНОМУ ОБМЕНУ: «ЧАС ДЖАЗА» УИЛЛИСА КОНОВЕРА

Рассмотрен пример использования джаза в политических целях в период глобального противостояния капитализма и социализма в 50–60-е гг. ХХ в. Особое внимание уделено личности харизматического радиожурналиста и модератора Уиллиса Коновера и его программы «Music USA — Jazz Hour». Описаны причины беспрецедентного успеха этой программы в странах советского блока. Хотя передачи Коновера не привели к дестабилизации коммунистической системы, они способствовали популяризации американского джаза и развитию культурных контактов между Западом и Востоком.

Ключевые слова: джазовая дипломатия, «холодная война», культурные контакты, музыкальные радиопередачи, ведущий радиопрограммы, интернационализация джаза.

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FROM CULTURAL EXPORT TO CULTURAL EXCHANGE: WILLIS CONOVER'S «JAZZ HOUR»

The article deals with a case of using jazz as a tool for political goals during the period of a global conflict between capitalism and socialism

in the 1950s – 1960s. Special attention is paid to the personality of Willis Conover, a charismatic radio journalist and moderator, and to his program «Music USA — Jazz Hour». The reasons for the unprecedented success of this program in the Soviet bloc countries are described. While Conover's broadcasts did not destabilize the communist system, they did much to popularize American jazz and develop cultural contacts between East and West.

Key words: jazz diplomacy, «cold war», cultural contacts, musical radio broadcast, radio program host, internationalization of jazz.

At the peak of the Cold War in 1954 the U.S. Department of State started a long-term program of American cultural export. In the difficult circumstances of a global confrontation between the capitalist West and communist East, the authors of the project had intended not only to demonstrate the achievements of American culture, but to improve the image of the United States in the world and spread the ideals of liberal democracy as well. Among other things, it was decided to inaugurate a special jazz program on the Voice of America. This part of the project is associated with the name of Willis Conover (1920-1996) who hosted a radio program, «Music USA — Jazz Hour», for 41 years, from 1955 until his death in 1996.

Conover's outstanding qualities and an unprecedented success of his program in the Soviet bloc countries have been studied in a number of printed and electronic publications. Researchers analyze the reasons for a certain mythologization of his personality [10] and identify his place in the history of jazz musical culture [5]. Biographical works [9; 6] and nostalgic reminiscences of Conover's contemporaries [3; 1] are also worth mentioning.

The aim of this paper is to examine the social and cultural aspects of Willis Conover's project in the context of the evolution of perception of jazz on both sides of the «Iron Curtain» in the 1950s – 1960s.

In the early 1950s the attitude towards jazz in the United States was ambiguous. For some white racist-minded people it was marginal, «uncivilized» music of black Americans. The impact of this form of music on the audience irritated them, too. Researchers attribute it to the great emotional power of jazz because this music «lends itself to any kind of protest and rebelliousness much better than most other forms of the arts» [2]. Jazz with its democratic spirit did not fit into the official culture; it challenged the «American dream» myth. There was a widespread belief that this music could not represent the country abroad.

At the same time, jazz gained great popularity in Western Europe without any support by American authorities. The situation was

paradoxical: black jazz musicians, idols of European public, were suffering from racial segregation in their own country. It was rather embarrassing to Washington officials who had claimed to be the best defenders of democracy and human rights. There was only one solution to this problem: integrate jazz into official American culture.

The choice of jazz as «America's secret weapon number one» was not fortuitous. As far back as in 1952 Charles Bohlen, then Ambassador to Moscow, reported to Washington about the vivid interest of Soviet youth in jazz as well as about the negative attitude of Communist leaders towards this form of music. He recommended to make use of this contradiction in the ideological struggle against the Soviet Union. [5].

Along with the zigzags of the Communist party's policy, the attitude of Soviet authorities towards jazz kept changing from tolerance to complete banning. In accordance with the ambivalent postulates of class struggle, jazz was defined now as the music of «oppressed Negroes», now as the decadent music of the USA, the class enemy. Jazz has had a «checkered history» in the Soviet Union: popular in the 1920 's, suppressed by Stalin, disliked by Krushchev, belittled by Khrennikov [7]. Generally speaking, jazz with its spirit of individualism and spontaneity did not agree with neither the official canons of musical culture nor with the rigid limits of collectivist ideology.

«Why did we love it so?» asked Russian writer Vasily Aksyonov of jazz:

«Perhaps for the same reason the Communists (and the Nazis before them) hated it. For its refusal to be pinned down, its improvisatory nature. Living as we did in a totalitarian society, we needed relief from the strictures of our minutely controlled everyday lives, of the five-year plans, of historical materialism. In Eastern Europe, jazz became more than music; it took on an ideology or, rather an anti-ideology. Jazz was a rendezvous with freedom.» [8]. Thus, a logical chain of a metonymical transfer arose in the minds of jazz fans: jazz is a symbol of freedom; jazz is an American form of music; consequently, the USA is a symbol of freedom.

When allocating funds for the «radio-export» of jazz, the U.S. Congress was probably expecting future political dividends from this project. It was also taken into account that the audience covered by regular radio broadcasts was much greater than in the case of occasional concerts of «live» music. However, as it turned out later, it was Willis Conover's outstanding personality and professionalism that had contributed most to the surprising success of the «Jazz Hour» program.

In 1954, when he signed his first contract with the VOA, Willis Conover was 34. He was well acquainted with the world of jazz: he was a respected jazz entrepreneur in Washington, D.C., hosted a popular jazz-oriented radio program, organized club dates and jazz concerts for musicians. But his main asset was a singularly attractive voice, a low-paced persuasive baritone with a sense of understanding and intimacy. Conover's first program of jazz recordings known as «Music USA – Jazz Hour» went on air on 6 January 1955. In the European part of the Soviet Union the 45-minutes «Jazz Hour» could be heard on short waves at 11:15 p. m. Moscow time. Being an apolitical English-language program, it was never jammed. «Music USA» was estimated to have 30 million listeners in the so-called «Socialist camp» [6].

Working for a government radio station, Conover managed to maintain his creative independence and kept renewing his contract every year. Willis determined the content and format of his programs himself, without any editor, using his own vast jazz record resources (over 60,000 albums). Each time when the administration criticized his playlist or tried to make him add a political touch to his programs, Conover used to say «O.K., don't renew my contract», and the administration would give up [3].

Speaking of the professional level of «Jazz Hour», L. Pereverzev called it «the ultimate school of mastery for serious jazz program authors and hosts» [3]. The moderator himself described his task as follows: «I want to help transcend any barriers between you and the music. I visualize just one listener, an intelligent person listening carefully...» [6]. The integrity of the program was attained not by the text, but by a purposeful selection of musical material.

Conover's broadcasts were designed by him to inform and educate. In his laconic manner, Willis briefly informed his listeners about the title of the piece, named the soloists, composer, arranger, band leader. Respecting his audience, the host never imposed his opinion on the listeners. From time to time Conover invited journalists and art critics to his studio, and interviewed outstanding jazzmen, among them Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, Ella Fitzgerald.

In his broadcasts Conover focused on jazz classics of the USA: Duke Ellington, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Mel Torme and others. However, Willis was not dogmatic; he admitted that foreign masters and new aesthetic elements could supplement 'canonical' American jazz but couldn't replace it. For Conover jazz was 'America's classical music' that combined elements of entertainment

and education. The aesthetic component was of great very importance to him, which probably explains his negative attitude towards rock music. Ignoring the social aspects of rock, Willis called it 'primitive' [10]. Some researchers, however, attribute this attitude to Conover's unwillingness to have a strong rival in the struggle for European listeners [5].

Working for a 'subversive' radio station, Willis shared his government's views on jazz as an ideological weapon [9; 5], but his programs were always apolitical. It was music that fulfilled the propagandist function. Conover used to draw a parallel between the musical structure of jazz and the anatomy of American democracy: «Jazz is a classical music parallel to our American political and social system. We agree in advance on the laws and customs we abide by, and 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.» [4]. For Conover, jazz was «disciplined freedom» [10].

It was important for the sponsors of the «Music USA» project to know how the idea to aggravate the political situation in the Eastern Bloc by means of jazz worked. Conover himself was interested in feedback to his broadcast, as were the radio program directors of VOA and the US administration, as the financial sources for the station [8]. However, it was not possible to get any reliable information until the periods of «thaw» and «détente», when Conover traveled to Poland (1959, 1964, 1976), Czechoslovakia (1964), Hungary (1973), the Soviet Union (1967, 1969, 1982). Only after his meetings with musicians and jazzfans from these countries was it possible to speak of the achievements and miscalculations of «jazz diplomacy».

In 1959, when he made his first trip to Poland where, to his great surprise, Conover was met at the airport by a large crowd, with reporters and photographers, a band, young girls with flowers and cheering people who waved at him from bicycles and motorbikes all the way into town. It was a great reception signalling a truly astonishing phenomenon: the mushrooming popularity of «Music USA», Conover's program on VOA. Jazz was the real guest of honor, but Conover personified it. He had become its ambassador and its messenger, and everywhere the people received the messenger joyfully [6]. The reception was followed by numerous meetings with jazzmen, during which Polish musicians discovered for themselves a new Willis Conover, not virtual, but real, a

charismatic figure, a wonderful connoisseur of jazz, an interesting and tolerant interlocutor. In turn, Willis was struck by the high level of musical education and professionalism of local jazz musicians. The relaxed discussions touched upon various serious themes: aesthetics of jazz, correlation of traditional and modern jazz and, jazz and other forms of music. Conover was happy to learn that the European intellectuals shared his views on jazz as a high form of art [5].

For many musicians and musicologists from Eastern Europe Conover's broadcasts in 1950 – 60-x became a sort of an «academy of jazz». Some of them got their first «jazz education» on the waves of the Voice of America: Tomasz Stańko, trombone; Krzysztof Komeda, piano, composer (Poland); Attila Zoller, guitar (Hungary); George Mraz, bass (Czechoslovakia); Valery Ponomarev, trumpet; Vladimir Tarasov, trumpet; jazz critics V. Feyertag, A. Batashev, A. Petrov, L. Pereverzev, E. Barban (USSR), and many others [9; 5; 1]. Dave Brubeck attributed the success of his tour of Poland in 1958 to the fact that the Polish public had been acquainted with American jazz through Conover's broadcasts [5]. One could assume that «Music USA – Jazz Hour» had contributed to the americanization of the political life in Communist countries or, at least, to the Americanization of local jazz scenes.

Is it possible, however, to consider Conover «the father of East European jazz» and «the man who contributed to the fall of the Berlin wall» more than politicians? Today, researchers disagree with this thesis. It turned out that the leaders of the communist regimes had played their own game around jazz based on the principle «if you cannot strangle opposition, then head it». The authorities of Poland proved to be the most flexible. J. Lester, for instance, quotes the statement of a Polish governmental official in 1955 that «the building of Socialism proceeds more lightly and more rhythmically to the accompaniment of jazz.» [6].

The first All-Polish jazz festival took place in 1956 in Gdansk; soon after the first issue of «Jazz» magazine appeared, and Polish Jazz Federation was established. In the GDR the government radio began jazz broadcasts only in 1958 under the modest title «Internationale Tanzmusik». In the same 1958 the first post-war jazz club opened in Leningrad.

In an effort to create a counterbalance to American jazz, the party ideologists counted (not without success) on «own» jazz, i.e. on alternative models, on developing local versions of jazz art.

In Poland, avant-garde jazz personified by Komeda enjoyed great popularity. In the Soviet Union, the authorities supported «own» style — an kind of combination of American jazz and Soviet «entertainment

music» (Knushevitsky, Tsfasman, Varlamov). Czechoslovakian musicians developed a Czech version of jazz-rock, and strayed from Conover's more purist musical taste [10].

In this situation Conover proved to be rather flexible. As from 1959, he visited almost every jazz festival in Eastern Europe. Very soon Willis realized that jazz did not cause any political upheaval in the Soviet bloc countries, but was rather a symbol of silent disagreement with the authorities. The rise of «own» styles able to compete with traditional American jazz was also obvious. Conover considered it expedient and necessary to support East European jazz. During the first meeting with Polish musicians of Willis recommended them to create a national style of jazz, based on folk melodies. Soon enough he got from Warsaw authorities permission to broadcast records of Polish jazz from his studio on the Voice of America. Conover started «Music with Friends», a new program featuring both American and European jazz. To the audience in Poland and other communist countries it was something like a recognition of their jazz style by America, the homeland of jazz [5]. Thus, to the surprise of the organizers of the «jazz diplomacy» program, cultural export turned into cultural exchange.

His meetings and cooperation with Polish, Hungarian, Soviet and Czech musicians changed Conover's conception of jazz as purely American music. Now he was convinced that jazz is a universal art with American roots, which in each country assumes national forms and develops independently. In the 1960-70s Willis created a transatlantic «institutional and personal network» [10], with active cooperation by journalists and jazz critics Andrzej Jaroszewski (Poland), Stanislav Titzl (Czechoslovakia), Imre Kiss (Hungary), Aleksey Batashev (USSR). Conover wrote a lot of letters of recommendation, arranged trips of talented musicians from the East to the USA in order to help them get musical education or the possibility for a concert tour (e.g. the Ganelin Trio from the USSR and Adam Makowicz from Poland). For many of them, he did not only write but he paid them also money from his private income or even hosted the musicians at his private home [5].

In 1964 Willis started a new project – Friends of the Music USA (FOMUSA), a kind of virtual listener's network [5]. Under these circumstances it would be more correct to call Conover not «the father», but «the promoter» of East European jazz.

Paradoxically, the name of the man who has made a great contribution to the popularization of American jazz, is practically unknown in the United States. It can be explained by the fact that the Voice of

America, being a government agency, has no right to broadcast to its own country. Willis, who he had arranged 40 special concerts at the White House and received several awards for contributions to American culture, never sought glory. It was only in 1993 that the House of Representatives of the USA honoured him with a resolution praising the man who had been called «the personification of American jazz». In 1979 movie director Andrzej Wasylewski made a documentary film «Willis i świat jazzu»; in 2008 a scientific conference was held in Warsaw with the theme «Jazz behind Iron Curtain», the participants of which stressed on Conover's role in popularizing jazz and spreading the ideals of democracy in the Eastern Bloc countries. And finally, in 2007 a concert in honour of the great moderator took place in Washington featuring musicians from former socialist countries — Conover's fans from the 1950s-60s generation.

Conclusion. At the height of the Cold War both sides of the political confrontation tried to use Conover for their own purposes. However, the success of «Music USA — Jazz Hour» did not destabilize the communist system. But the other side failed also, because they could not stop the spread of American musical culture, despite of the strategy to promote their «own» jazz.

In this situation Conover rose to the occasion and stayed above politics. Now it is time to appreciate his services to contemporaries. On the one hand, Willis Conover did much for the recognition of American jazz as the classical music of the USA. On the other hand, his broadcasts promoted the development of jazz musical culture in European socialist countries. We should also note Conover's contribution to the processes of internationalization of jazz and, in the long run, to establishing an atmosphere of mutual understanding between the West and the East.

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