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The Jazz Ambassadors

Premieres Friday, May 4 at 10 p.m. on PBS (check local listings)

Streams beginning May 5 on pbs.org and PBS apps

Synopsis:

The Cold War and Civil Rights movement collide in this remarkable story of music, diplomacy and race. In 1955, as the Soviet Union's pervasive propaganda about the U.S. and American racism spread globally, African-American Congressman **Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.** convinced **President Eisenhower** that jazz was the best way to intervene in the Cold War cultural conflict. For the next decade, America's most influential jazz artists, including **Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman** and **Dave Brubeck**, along with their racially-integrated bands, traveled the globe to perform as cultural ambassadors. But the unrest back home forced them to face a painful moral dilemma: how could they promote the image of a tolerant America abroad when the country still practiced Jim Crow segregation and racial equality remained an unrealized dream? Told through striking archival film footage, photos and radio clips, with iconic performances throughout, the documentary reveals how the U.S. State Department unwittingly gave the burgeoning Civil Rights movement a major voice on the world stage just when it needed one most. **Leslie Odom, Jr.**, narrates.

Notable Talent:

- **Quincy Jones**, Musician and Arranger
- **Charlie Persip**, Drummer, 1965 Dizzy Gillespie Tour
- **Adam Clayton Powell, III**, Son of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.
- **Darius Brubeck**, Jazz Musician
- **Bill Crow**, Bass Player, Benny Goodman USSR Tour
- **Leslie Odom, Jr.**, film narrator
- **Hugo Berkeley**, Peabody Award-winning director (*Land Rush, A Normal Life*)

Major support provided by



- **Mick Csáky**, producer (producer & director of *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll* for *American Masters*)

Short TV Listing

Discover how the Cold War and Civil Rights movement collided in a music story of diplomacy and race.

Long TV Listing

Discover how the Cold War and Civil Rights movement collided when America asked Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman to travel as cultural ambassadors and combat racially-charged Soviet propaganda through their music.

Running Time: 60 minutes

Noteworthy Facts:

- Spurred by presenter **Willis Conover**'s hugely-popular ***Voice of America*** radio show, audiences worldwide develop a passion for American jazz.
- When **Louis Armstrong** plays before more than 100,000 people in West Africa, U.S. diplomats take note, thinking that jazz could give America an edge in the Cold War.
- In January 1956, trumpeter **Dizzy Gillespie** kicks off his tour of the Middle East and Turkey to help counter Soviet stories about American racism.
- Over the next 10 years, more than 20 tours featuring renowned jazz musicians visit over 100 countries, giving Civil Rights an international platform even while the performers themselves questioned representing a nation still roiling with segregation and intolerance.
- **Benny Goodman** and his mixed-race band's 1962 tour of the Soviet Union was the first time that the Russians permitted a foreign jazz band to tour the region.
- The U.S. State Department scaled back the Jazz Ambassadors program when **Duke Ellington**'s tour of the Middle East and India was tragically cut short by JFK's assassination.

Buzzworthy Moments:

- **Louis Armstrong** performing in the British West African colony of The Gold Coast (now Ghana), where he dedicates the iconic song "Black and Blue," about the agony of racism, to **Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah**.
- **Quincy Jones** shares his incredible experiences at age 22 as **Dizzy Gillespie**'s musical director, arranger and trumpet player with the band, performing in countries including Iraq, Iran, Syria and Pakistan.
- In a press interview after the September 1957 incident in Little Rock, AR, where white crowds prevented African American children from entering their school, **Louis Armstrong** discusses racism in American homes and says he refuses to lie about it overseas.

- In a rare interview on Swedish Television amidst the U.S. struggle towards Civil Rights, **Duke Ellington** discusses the sacrifices and cultural contributions made by African Americans, as well as jazz being recognized as “the American Music” while the genre was “mostly Negro.”

Production Credits:

The Jazz Ambassadors is a co-production of THIRTEEN Productions LLC for WNET and Antelope South Limited and Normal Life Pictures, in association with the BBC and ZDF, in collaboration with Arte. Directed by Peabody Award-winner Hugo Berkeley and produced by Emmy-winner Mick Csáky. For THIRTEEN: Benjamin Phelps is coordinating producer, Julie Anderson is executive producer and Stephen Segaller is executive in charge.

Underwriters:

Major support for *The Jazz Ambassadors* was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional support was provided, in part, by Jody and John Arnhold, The Fong Family, Dr. Edward C. Mapp, and public television viewers.

About WNET

WNET is America’s flagship PBS station and parent company of [THIRTEEN](#) and [WLIW21](#). WNET also operates [NJTV](#), the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its broadcast channels, three cable services (THIRTEEN PBSKids, Create and World) and online streaming sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each week. WNET produces and presents such acclaimed PBS series as [Nature](#), [Great Performances](#), [American Masters](#), [PBS NewsHour Weekend](#) and a range of documentaries, children’s programs, and local news and cultural offerings. WNET’s groundbreaking series for children and young adults include [Get the Math](#), [Oh Noah!](#) and [Cyberchase](#) as well as [Mission US](#), the award-winning interactive history game. WNET highlights the tri-state’s unique culture and diverse communities through [NYC-ARTS](#), [Theater Close-Up](#), [NJTV News with Mary Alice Williams](#) and [MetroFocus](#), the daily multi-platform news magazine focusing on the New York region. In addition, WNET produces online-only programming including the award-winning series about gender identity, [First Person](#), and an intergenerational look at tech and pop culture, [The Chatterbox with Kevin and Grandma Lill](#). In 2015, THIRTEEN launched Passport, an online streaming service which allows members to see new and archival THIRTEEN and PBS programming anytime, anywhere: www.thirteen.org/passport.

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