Over the years, the music gurus of the Voice have attempted to offer a full range of American music and, in some regions, indigenous songs and ballads to an eager listening public around the world. The best-known VOA effort, clearly, has centered on jazz, that unique blend of ragtime and blues combining American with African and Caribbean musical traditions. It also became celebrated in much of the twentieth century as the "music of freedom."

"However far away from home I've traveled covering the news these many years," ABC's Peter Jennings told his listeners in 1996, "there has remained a constant: the voice of Willis Conover via the Voice of America saying: 'This is jazzzzz.'"

The *Reader's Digest* called Willis "the world's favorite American." The famed host for more than four decades before his death in 1996 was virtually unknown in his own country because of Smith-Mundt Act provisions prohibiting the distribution of VOA broadcasts in the United States. But abroad, he was better known than many American secretaries of state. His deep, mellifluous voice and measured delivery cut through static and jamming. His personal accounts of encounters with jazz giants inspired tens of millions over the years—politicians, soldiers, diplomats, as well as musicians.

"If Conover has been a prophet unheard in his own land," *Down Beat* magazine said, "he has been a jazz messiah 'round the globe, the best-known and best-loved ambassador for America's art form since Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie." Congress passed a resolution in 1993 saluting Willis. President Reagan, congratulating Conover on his ten thousandth VOA broadcast, recalled the words of two Bulgarian listeners who had come to the United States: "We are two lucky escapees from behind the Iron Curtain…and we have been living for years with you, your voice, your music. There is absolutely no way that we can describe what enormous importance you have for somebody living back there. . . . You are the music, you are the light, you are America."

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Willis Conover and Ella Fitzgerald

Willis Conover

Jazz Ambassador to the World

Willis Conover

1920 – 1996

"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 having reached agreement, we are free to do whatever we wish within those 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 those 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 the conduct of their lives."

—Willis Conover in "Jazz Forum", 1958

Voice of America, widely known for its straightforward news reporting, has always maintained a balance in its programming between news and culture, particularly music. As far back as 1945, VOA music director Bess Lomax counseled VOA's programmers to incorporate all kinds of music, both from the U.S. and around the world. She urged, "We can create a bond of friendship by telling our audience in effect: 'We in America know your music as well as our own.'" In all VOA's history, Willis Conover was indisputably the most effective music ambassador connecting VOA with the world. In doing so, he brought jazz–America's indigenous music form–to a global audience.

Willis Conover (left) interview Irving Berlin

Willis Conover graced VOA's and the world's airwaves for more than 40 years with his celebrated program of the best in American popular and jazz music. Jazz, which Willis Conover liked to call the "music of freedom," struck a responsive chord among listeners throughout the world and elicited a particularly strong response in the Soviet bloc countries where his programs enjoyed colossal popularity. As America's acknowledged "ambassador of jazz," his appearances at concerts and festivals in Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Brazil, and India attracted large crowds of admirers. Honored by *Down Beat* magazine with a Lifetime Achievement award, the Berklee College of Music, the National Jazz Educators Association, and by Polish leader Lech Walesa at a special reception at Polish embassy, Willis Conover was a true American classic. Yet due to the prohibition on VOA broadcasting within the United States, he is far better known outside his home country than within.

Conover found his calling early. He was 14 when he was cast as a radio announcer in a school play, and began his radio career at the age of 18. Working in small stations in Maryland, he conducted interviews and put together shows, operated radio equipment and swept up the office at the end of the day.

The Army brought Willis to Washington, D.C. when he was drafted and stationed at Maryland's Fort Meade in 1943. He quickly joined the local music scene, where he promoted jazz performances, worked as a jazz host at WWDC (AM), and formed relationships with homegrown and visiting artists, including Charlie "Bird" Parker, Stan Kenton, and Louis Armstrong. He consistently pushed against Jim Crow laws, and his efforts helped to desegregate the city's nightspots.

Willis Conover and Louis Armstrong

When the Voice of America (VOA) sought to begin a new music program of popular music and jazz, Conover was a logical choice. It didn't take long for him to come to terms with VOA's program director (and jazz enthusiast) John Wiggin, and *Music USA* took to the airwaves on January 6, 1955. The program's first hour featured popular music, then during the second hour Willis indulged his passion for jazz and shared it with the world. For many musicians behind the Iron Curtain and elsewhere Willis, through VOA, provided the only link that they had to jazz. *Music USA* featured everyone from Dizzy Gillespie to Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald to Duke Ellington, whose performance of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train" was the program's theme song from the very first broadcast.

Throughout his life, Willis Conover was a fiercely independent individualist. Despite his long career at VOA, he steadfastly refused to become a government employee, instead renewing his one-year contract 40 times. Willis never relied on others for musical selections; everything he played came from his personal music collection. He self-produced his shows, and never had a guest host. He used a mix of pre-produced new programs and carefully selected repeat broadcasts to cover his absences while on jazz-related trips. His fans couldn't get enough of him. Whether in Warsaw or Bombay, Rio de Janeiro or Moscow, Conover was always greeted by crowds as large and enthusiastic as those usually afforded visiting dignitaries.

Willis Conover with Duke Ellington

Although Willis' career ended with his death from cancer in 1996, he has not been forgotten. For many around the world, he remains "the voice of America."

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