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# j.b. spins



Jazz and improvised politics.

## about me

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J.B. works in the book publishing industry, and also teaches jazz survey courses at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. He has written jazz articles for publications which would be appalled by his political affiliation. He also coordinated instrument donations for displaced musicians on a volunteer basis for the Jazz Foundation of America during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Send e-mail to [jb.feedback@yahoo.com](mailto:jb.feedback@yahoo.com).

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wednesday, september 26, 2007

## Jazz Diplomacy

*"I'm the real ambassador*

*It was evident I was sent by government to take your place*

*All I do is play the blues and meet the people face to face*

*I'll explain and make it plain; I represent the human race and don't pretend to more"*



Those were among the lyrics delivered by Louis Armstrong, "Ambassador Satch," in Dave Brubeck's original musical *The Real Ambassadors*. Set against the backdrop of the U.S. State Department's popular jazz goodwill programs, Armstrong plays one such touring musician, mistaken for an actual bureaucratic Ambassador as represented by Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross (singing lyrics like: "we have followed protocol with absolute propriety, we're Yankees to the core").

The obvious implication was a jazz musician could influence many more hearts and minds abroad than a state department functionary. What was true in the 1960's is true today. Enter the organization American Voices, plugged in this month's *Jazz Times*. David Adler's guest column quotes Dr. Gene Aitken, a jazz instructor for the organization, who had recently conducted clinics in Iraq:

*"It was the experience of a lifetime," Aitken exclaims. There were roughly 50 jazz students, ranging from 15 to 50 years of age. "They had barely any previous exposure to jazz," Aitken says, "but they had a thirst for information, and the progress from day one to the end was tremendous. I've never encountered anything as meaningful."*

In February of this year, the group produced workshops and a concert with the [Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra](#), culminating in orchestral performances of Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" and "It Don't Mean a

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Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing." In *JT Ferguson* attributes why jazz (about 25% of their programming) has proved such a successful component in their presentations: "People who have close contact with traditional music take to jazz very easily." Their [Unity Performing Arts Academy](#), at which Aitken taught this July, proved the universal appeal of jazz and other American forms of music, successfully bringing together 300 musicians from around Iraq, including Kurdistan, representing Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians to form a special Unity Orchestra.

American Voices has been active in Afghanistan as well, producing in late 2005 the first concert by American artists in twenty-five years, performing in collaboration with native musicians. Executive director John Ferguson explained to [Downbeat](#) magazine: "The musicians we were working with had all gone to Pakistan during the Taliban era because they were chopping off the hands of musicians in Afghanistan."

One could argue that jazz's free spirit and democratic nature are also very appealing to a formerly oppressed people. After all, Willis Conover's jazz program *Music USA* was by far the most popular programming on Voice of America during the Cold War. American Voices are finding a similar desire for what jazz represents in their current work in the Middle East and beyond.

Clearly, this is an organization worthy of support. In addition to producing clinics and concerts, they also supply local musicians with instruments and charts. Their efforts obviously qualify as good news from Iraq, at a time when many wish to deny any such thing is possible for their own extremist partisan motives. You can support American Voices' efforts [here](#), and check out some of their work on youtube [here](#).

Labels: [Afghanistan](#), [American Voices](#), [Iraq](#)

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