

Global Swing: identifying structure in an improvised world

At the crossroads of democratic capitalism and communism, at the point of tension, stands Berlin -- an iconic geopolitical space whose infamous Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall invoke images that are etched in the memory of generations. When the Wall fell and Soviet communism imploded, the vestiges of ideology lingered.¹ Artistic exchanges in Berlin have historically challenged the prevailing ideology and can serve as a structural guide for our global system now.² Wynton Marsalis's *Swing Symphony*, commissioned in conjunction with the Berlin Philharmonic, engages the diversity of human emotion and tells the history of jazz in sound.³ Significantly, Marsalis's symphony is blues-based; each movement purposely and purposefully emphasizes the low-down-dirty-shame of the human struggle as the larger composition grows increasingly more complex. The diversity of instrumental voices that often form a cacophonous *mêlée* are shaped by a steady rhythmic flow and are reconciled, cooperatively, through various movements. Indeed, Marsalis's composition *swings*⁴ – it integrates diverse orchestral voices into an overarching structure while recognizing individual virtuosity⁵ and sustaining forward movement by playing with the tension between silence and sound.⁶ Identifying and modeling systems that privilege dialogue and demonstrate cooperative efficiency is vital as we craft new memories of world events both past and present. Engaging the troubled past and reconciling it with the present imaginatively can help usher in a new era of civility even as we honor individuality. “Openness to innovation” can help nations succeed in the emerging interrelated international system where power and resources will be shared and cooperation will be central to sustaining improved relations and world order.⁷ “Engagement must go far beyond

¹ The Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989 and Soviet communism imploded in 1991.

² For historical insights on how the arts permeated seemingly impenetrable Iron Curtain (and later the Berlin Wall), see: Penny M. Von Eschen, [Satchmo Blows Up the World](#); Uta G. Poiger, [Jazz Rock and Rebels](#); and Casey Nelson Blake, ed., [The Arts of Democracy](#).

³ *Swing Symphony* premiered at the Berlin Philharmonic in June 2010 under the baton of Sir Simon Rattle.

⁴ Of course, swing also indicates a certain tension between forces of push and pull, gravity, and so Marsalis's swing can also be thought of as a metaphor for reconciling societal tensions.

⁵ Improvisation, or virtuosity, is a key feature of jazz that honors individuality and contributes to sustaining rhythmic flow – in order to keep swinging.

⁶ Speaking of the House of Swing, the unofficial name for Lincoln Center's newest constituent that features three performance venues dedicated exclusively to jazz, Marsalis explains, “Swing” is an environment in which “Everything is integrated: the relationship between one space and another, the relationship between the audience and the musicians, is one fluid motion...” See, <http://www.jalc.org>

government-to-government interactions.”⁸ Artistic collaborations offer a viable template for forming cooperative relations.⁹ “Face-to-face negotiations”¹⁰ are crucial as we learn to effectively integrate into a global system in which no single actor holds primary power.¹¹ Global swing will be necessary in our improvised world. This essay will analyze Wynton Marsalis’s *Swing Symphony* and the power of soft diplomacy in the building of cultural bridges.

Berlin cultural exchange during the Cold War

Cultural interactions permeate real and imagined barriers. Although there were restrictions against US imports after World War I and although few American bands came to Europe during the Weimar era, music permeated barriers by way of sheet music and records; sound carried the culture.¹² Additionally, German jazz bands emerged and locals could hear music and dance to jazz during the 1920s and 30s.¹³ After 1945, US markets opened to West Germany and there was an increase in shared consumer goods and population flow between East and West Germany. US officials embarked upon a concerted effort to combat communism via exporting propaganda that imparted the alleged advantages of democratic capitalism. “Their [Cold War] arsenal included radio broadcasts, trade fairs, photography exhibits, musical and dance performances, athletic events, and films.”¹⁴ Even after the erection of the infamous Berlin Wall decades later, and as Uta Poiger notes, “radio broadcasts and visitors continued to transport American popular culture into

⁷ Eric S. Edelman, “The Broken Consensus: America’s Contested Primacy,” *World Affairs*, November/December 2010: 59.

⁸ Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 89 No. 6, 16.

⁹ Cultural institutions will be discussed in the larger work. Essentially, the architecture of institutions can encourage openness and dialogue through the use of physical spaces in the same way musicians honor openness and dialogue through audible sounds and silences.

¹⁰ Robert Zelnick “Shifting Sands: Why Peace Talks Might Just Work,” *World Affairs*, November/December 2010: 24.

¹¹ See a discussion on nonpolarity: Richard N. Haas “The Age of Nonpolarity: What will follow US Dominance” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 87, No. 3, May/June 2008. Also see the National Intelligence Council’s 2008 *Global Trends* report that articulates a vision of a global multipolar system.

¹² Uta G. Poiger. [Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany](#); Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000: 2.

¹³ Poiger, 16.

¹⁴ Laura A. Belmonte, “Exporting America: the U.S. Propaganda Offensive, 1945-1959” in Casey Nelson Blake, ed., [The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State](#); Washington DC, The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007: 127.

East Germany.”¹⁵ Consumer goods were exported to appeal to the materialistic nature of people because US policymakers thought that showcasing what they perceived as the “average American” was the best strategy for changing people’s minds abroad. Yet, attempts to demonstrate the alleged benefits of capitalism over communism were fraught with “arrogance and naïveté” as Laura A. Belmonte wisely notes. Additionally, this strategy did not simply “demonstrate patriotism and conviction” and US policy makers’ belief in the “superiority of democratic capitalism over communism” as Belmonte asserts.¹⁶ Rather, the strategy of appealing primarily to material interests caricatured both American identity and the US foreign policy agenda, exposing each as a temporal temperamental thing as malleable as the markets they served.¹⁷ With obvious weaponry at rest and a policy of containment in place, the war continued on the level of ideology; ironically leaving individuals to decide their allegiances democratically, regardless of state intervention.¹⁸

Face-to-face interaction

Musicians know face-to-face interaction is a vital component of forming better relations. Musicians, enthusiastically play for audiences and look forward to getting to know each other through sound. Areas considered hostile by the State Department were looked upon by musicians as opportunities for meaningful artistic exchange; they could travel to places otherwise prohibited and could earn a good living at a time when big bands were facing financial difficulties. The State Department, too, thought the tours a good idea because they could promote an idea of America they hoped would win supporters. Benny Goodman’s visit to Thailand was an overwhelming success for both Goodman and the State Department because the King played saxophone and so he and Goodman held jam sessions at the palace and also played neighborhood nightclubs and dancehalls with local musicians. Such interpersonal exchanges resulted in Goodman and his band establishing, “the closest bonds of understanding” with the Thai government and people.¹⁹ Of the tour, Penny M. Von

¹⁵ Poiger, 16.

¹⁶ Belmonte, 141.

¹⁷ My larger study, [Train Whistle Diplomacy: International Jazz Tours and the State](#), includes an in-depth analysis of foreign policy strategies under different presidential administrations.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “US Foreign Policy in East Central Europe – A Study in Contradiction” (1957) in Katherine R. Constabile and J. Quinn Martin, eds., [From the Cold War to the War on Terror: 60 Years of US Foreign Policy](#); New York, Columbia University, 2006: 9. Brzezinski describes the period as one of “intensive psychological warfare” that included Radio Free Europe (1949) and Voice of America broadcasts (1950).

¹⁹ Von Eschen, 46.

Eschen recounts the sentiments of one commentator who wrote, “music hath charms such as [former Secretary of State] Mr. Dulles hath not.”²⁰ Likewise, Dave Brubeck’s tour to Russia was equally successful, politically and personally. In Kabul, Afghanistan, Brubeck tuned in to the sounds of the night and “was moved by music that had survived for 5,000 years... The reverence Brubeck and his quartet felt for the non-Western musics they encountered could be heard in their own evolving style.”²¹ During musical collaborations, each musician became the student of the other as in Bombay where Brubeck played piano behind a nationally known sitar player. Brubek recounts, “His influence made me play in a different way. Although Hindu scales, melodies, and harmonies are so different, we *understood* each other.”²² As one State official mused of such collaborations, “You reach people on a personal level. It’s that simple.”²³ Louis Armstrong’s tour of Africa was also an overwhelming success for both Armstrong and the State Department. Armstrong who was greeted by some 100,000 fans, was “overwhelmed by his feelings of connection and kinship with the Ghanaian people” and the State Department was elated by the widespread enthusiasm and positive media feedback.²⁴ Dizzy Gillespie’s tours of Yugoslavia, East Pakistan, and Lebanon “won over a wide variety of audiences” and one Pakistani journalist noted, “The language of diplomacy... ought to be translated into the score for a bop trumpet” and a US Ambassador commented, “Gillespie’s band has made our job much easier.”²⁵ Seasoned experts in diplomacy, musicians can be meaningful contributors to discussions on international relations and foreign policy.

State officials were certainly aware of the bonds formed through creative alliances but policy agendas and racism thwarted meaningful diplomatic success. Jazz was used as a covert weapon, a means to achieving a political end and black musicians were used to bolster US credibility in spreading democracy despite the multitude of domestic racial

²⁰ Von Eschen, 47.

²¹ Von Eschen, 51-52.

²² Von Eschen, 52.

²³ Von Eschen, ,51.

²⁴ Von Eschen, 60-61. Von Eschen has an insightful discussion about the politics behind Armstrong’s African tour and the State Department’s eagerness to send him to the Soviet Union and South America. See, Von Eschen: Chapter 3.

²⁵ Von Eschen, 33.

tensions that plagued the earliest tours.²⁶ Genuine interest in getting to know the people of a country or its regional concerns was eerily absent and propaganda reigned. “Jazz [was] consistently represented as a stealth weapon” intricately connected with “spies, espionage, and counterinsurgency” a reality that runs in the opposite direction of “the connective bonds forged through the languages of modernization, modernism, and egalitarianism.”²⁷ The tours demonstrated what Von Eschen calls an “extraordinary confidence in American’s ability to shape the world in its image”; or more precisely, the image the US wanted to project throughout the world.²⁸ The goal of getting to better know the people of foreign nations and so building policy around and in support of shared ideals remained ostensibly absent from State Department objectives.²⁹ Yet, political agendas and personally meaningful experiences were intricately entwined. For example, while Louis Armstrong considered his 1960-61 tour of the Congo successful due to the active engagement with fans and a feeling of belonging with the African people, State officials marked their accomplishment with the successful assassination of then reigning Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in a US effort to control the mineral-rich region.³⁰ As Von Eschen insightfully notes, “oust[ing] leaders... depended on ethnocentric assumptions about non-Western leaders that prohibited American policymakers from imagining them as independent thinking political agents. US policymakers, instead, tended to see leaders in [the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America] as pawns or potential pawns of the Soviets.”³¹ Opportunistic and blind to human complexities, State Department officials missed the chance to engage in the more meaningful diplomacy efforts and successes realized by musicians.

Cultural ignorance has dominated US foreign policy but a transformation may well be underway. The “ambiguity or complexity when it [comes] to assessing the allegiances of national leaders [of color]” that Von Eschen notes leads to shortsightedness and impacts

²⁶ For a discussion on how black musicians viewed their use during State Department tours, see Penny M. Von Eschen’s, [Satchmo Blows Up the World](#), and Uta G. Poiger’s, [Jazz Rock and Rebels](#).

²⁷ Von Eschen, 27.

²⁸ Von Eschen, 5.

²⁹ Acknowledging the “either or” way the US viewed its Cold War options, Brzezinski notes, “US policy, in keeping with its commitment to all-out peace [viewd this] as the only alternative to all-out war...” See Brzezinski, 11.

³⁰ Von Eschen discusses the complicated nature of the Armstrong tour of the Congo, the regions independence from Belgium and US concerns over minerals being made available to the Soviets for the purpose of arms creation. See, [Satchmo Blows Up the World](#): 65-71.

³¹ Von Eschen, 29.

policy decisions that have led to aggressive and/or preemptive action as in the case of the Congo assassination and war in Iraq.³² In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Commission found that Khalid Shaikh Mohammed's reasons for the attack were not his "animus toward the United States... but rather from his violent disagreement with US foreign policy favoring Israel."³³ Yet, Bush era policymakers could not hear this criticism and instead proclaimed a mantra that harkened back decades earlier, asserting, "They hate our freedoms; our freedoms of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."³⁴ Noting that the US failed to "understand why Al-Queda was so enraged at the United States," John J. Mearsheimer asserts, "These mistakes led the administration to adopt policies that made the problem worse, not better."³⁵ In "Shifting Sands" long-time journalist Robert Zelnick draws on his own experience interviewing countless members of controversial groups. Speaking of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli strife, he credits the Obama administration for "appear[ing] to appreciate the necessity to the peace process of face-to-face negotiations."³⁶ Zelnick's comments on the Middle East are timely; he asserts, "Washington helps thwart democracy in countries where it fears the outcome of elections, as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia."³⁷ He continues with the following advice, "Washington should get out of the business of trying to spread democracy around the globe, and more generally acting as if we have the right and the responsibility to interfere in the domestic politics of other countries."³⁸ Thus far, it seems the US is taking a position of listening and waiting for the Egyptian people decide the type of rule they want.³⁹

³² Von Eschen, 29.

³³ John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design" in *The National Interest*, Number 111, January/February 2011: 24.

³⁴ Mearsheimer, 21.

³⁵ Mearsheimer, 25.

³⁶ Robert Zelnick, "Shifting Sands"; *World Affairs*, November/December 2010:24.

³⁷ Zelnick, 29.

³⁸ Zelnick, 31.

³⁹ In an interview with Christiane Amanpour, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton makes clear the appointment of a Vice President to President Mubarak's regime is a beginning but is not enough. She asserts the US Obama administration's stance that "democracy, human rights, [and] economic reform are in the best interests of the Egyptian people. Any government that does not try to move in that direction cannot meet the legitimate needs of the people. And in the 21st century... People are not going to stand by any longer and not be given the opportunity to fulfill their own God-given potential."
<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/01/155586.htm>

Diplomacy in Action

Wynton Marsalis's Swing Symphony offers an example of diplomacy in action. Commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic in conjunction with the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Barbican, Swing Symphony is a six part musical collaboration par excellence. An onstage joint performance of the Berlin Philharmonic and the 15 members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Swing Symphony illuminates the diversity of individual styles within the overarching sound of the ensemble. The *First Movement*, begins with a thunderous rhythmic beating of the kettle drum. Surely harkening the African roots of jazz, the 'talking drum' of lore is saying something that must be heard and rallies all other instruments to play.⁴⁰ Bringing together two seemingly disparate styles of music could certainly lead to chaos. Sharing their thoughts of the joint venture, members of the Berlin Philharmonic revealed to conductor Sir Simon Rattle, "You know, the trouble is we just feel so stiff in comparison."⁴¹ When the two orchestras commence to play, a cacophony of sound ensues. Amidst the chaos, the listener cannot be sure where the m  l  e is headed or if this ambitious composition will work. The tension soon comes to a head but then a long-cascading decrescendo follows, creating an instrumental exhale, and order is realized through each section as strings, woodwinds, and brass engage in an orderly dialogue while the rhythm section maintains the opening thunder, in a recognizable pattern but in a subdued manner. The Movement ends with a unified ensemble sound; there has been clear sonic progression from the opening chaos through the articulation of individual voices. Composing an extended work for two apparently dissimilar orchestras requires skills that are transferable to the diplomatic realm, namely: a vision that is bigger than perceived differences and the ability to recognize and respect individuality despite and even in spite of any preconceived notions of musical authority.

Swing Time

Marsalis composed Swing Symphony with the intention of telling the history of jazz in sound. As Kate Connolly notes of the work, there is an "intoxicating blend of rhythms – from New Orleans march and the playful character of Charleston along with erotic tango beats, the virtuosic sounds of bebop, together with jazz fugues from the 1950s... that create

⁴⁰ Albert Murray. Stomping the Blues. Da Capo Press, New York: 1974: 118-125. Murray has an extended discussion of the significance of drums and the influence of trains in blues and jazz music.

⁴¹ Kate Connolly, "All Das Jazz: the Berlin Phil Swing with Wynton Marsalis" June 2010.

a rich musical fabric.”⁴² While these competing stylistic elements certainly pose compositional challenges, they must be reconciled in order for the larger work to be realized. Diversity presents challenges homogeneity does not. Noting his band’s admiration for the philharmonic, Marsalis says, “There’s a certain deep respect and collegiality which is genuine” and sincere intentions are a motivating force in taking on challenges.⁴³ Marsalis’s *Second Movement* features a brilliant solo by Ted Nash who uses his alto saxophone to enliven the dialogue before an oboe⁴⁴ and clarinet lend their voices to the discussion. Joe Temperly’s solo on baritone saxophone (12:39) brings the two orchestras together in a deeply lyrical reminiscence, a longing or yearning that pulls all members into an emotionally rich communal expression. Yet such cooperative moments can be short lived. Breaks in tranquility, tension, are opportunities for progress for as tensions mount; so, too, do prospects for innovation. The musician’s break is his “moment of truth”; his opportunity to “improvise, to do [his] own thing, to establish [his] identity, to write [his] signature on the epidermis of actuality which is to say entropy.”⁴⁵ The mayhem of brass and rhythm that erupts in the *Third Movement* (24:39) threatens the sonic unity; every instrument is agitated. Order resumes but only momentarily as trouble again brews again in the rhythm section making the silence that closes this Movement less a reconciliation of cacophony than a hard won compromise to be still. As with the march of history, troubles are constant. The briarpatch, the thorns of life, is replete with obstacles; the goal is to identify them and navigate through and around them in such a way as to maintain personal integrity. The rumbled, growled, and otherwise cacophonous sounds in Marsalis’s extended work indicate ongoing historical struggle, progress through the briarpatch, and the ultimate ability to create order out of chaos.

I Love to Tell the Story

The blues base of Marsalis’s Swing Symphony is a self-conscious way of acknowledging the individual, his struggles and his triumphs. Additionally, Marsalis’s use of the blues is an acknowledgement of the struggle of people of color in the US and the human

⁴²Connolly.

⁴³Connolly.

⁴⁴ I am not sure if this is an oboe or English horn.

⁴⁵ Albert Murray. The Blue Devils of Nada: a Contemporary Approach to Aesthetic Statement. New York, Pantheon Books, 1996: 95.

struggle against injustice worldwide. As Anthony Bogues asserts, we need “to think, if possible, from the perspectives of those who have been slaves, whose ideas and practices have been erased from the body politic” in order to write their stories and perchance, right the historic wrongs.⁴⁶ The historic failure of US officials to recognize ethnic leaders as “independent thinking political agents” has led to catastrophic results in domestic and foreign relations.⁴⁷ A multivocal story needs to be told that lends a different perspective and that makes the voices audible above the chaos. “All catastrophic events, while wounding, produce cries. In hearing and listening to these cries we begin to glimpse alternative possibilities in relation to the historically catastrophic event.”⁴⁸ As told by a blues musician, the story is one that plays on blue feelings such as hardship and longing, engages them and transforms them into an expression of hopefulness.

As Cultural Historian Albert Murray states, “the fundamental function of the blues musician (also known as the jazz musician) [and] the most obvious as well as the most pragmatic mission of [his] performance is not only to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being, but also to evoke an ambiance of Dionysian revelry in the process.”⁴⁹ Marsalis’s *Fourth Movement* features an extended solo by bassist Carlos Henriquez (33:20), hand clapping that purposely invokes the human instrument, and a lyrical solo by reedsman Sherman Irby (35:40) that is so expressive it rivals the human voice. The repeated refrains, the edgy peaks, and the reconciliation of tension are key ways of identifying identify the blues in Marsalis’s work. A feeling of curiosity permeates the *Fifth Movement* and voices are purposely quirky at first but mature into self-conscious introspective expressions. The steady, confident progression of the *Sixth* (and final) *Movement* is decidedly cohesive. Gone is the disruptive agitation and unbridled chaos of earlier movements. Opening with steady hand clapping, individual virtuosity is no longer disruptive but is contained within an ensemble sound that swings, that plays on and through the tension and creates a steady rhythmic flow. A certain mellowness pervades this

⁴⁶ Anthony Bogues. *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, & Freedom*. Hanover, New Hampshire; Dartmouth University Press, 2010:47.

⁴⁷ Von Eschen, 29.

⁴⁸ Bogues, 58.

⁴⁹ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*: 17. Murray also includes a musical description of the blues and its form. “The traditional twelve-bar blues stanza consists of three lines of four bars each. But there are four bars of music in each line and only two bars (plus one beat) of lyric space.... In most conventional compositions the chorus or refrain is the part that is repeated by all available voices or instruments. But sometimes musicians refer to the solos as choruses.” 93-94.

Movement that Marsalis describes as, “a wistful type of feeling that is not sad, and its not happy, it’s just like a feeling of contentment and a quiet celebration....”⁵⁰ Ending with a final. “ahhhh” and trumpet solo by the composer, the individual and his voice are triumphant.

[Ellington’s] insistence on music as expression, and specifically historical expression that marks a reaction to slavery and oppression, is critical.”⁵¹ Following in the footsteps of jazz’s most prolific composer but forthrightly charting his own course, Wynton Marsalis writes the history of jazz in sound and by so doing composes a narrative that confronts and reconciles (to the extent possible) the racial, socio-economic and other tensions that are an inextricable part of US history. “Music takes on the responsibility of representation.”⁵² Marsalis’s enterprise documents our most salient historical moments in a form that transcends language, geopolitical borders, and cyberspace. Moreover, documenting history is a self-conscious way of shaping memories; by discerning what images get recorded, Marsalis incorporates the cries of the unheard in his narrative but transforms this through the blues into lyrical expression. “What must be remembered is that people live in terms of images which represent the fundamental conceptions embodied in their rituals and myths.”⁵³ The close of Swing Symphony does not indicate finality. Rather, the “break” that signals the composition’s end also anticipates its continuation. Albert Murray reminds us nobody has “ever been able to get rid of the blues forever... You can only drive them away and keep them at bay for the time being. Because they are always there, as if waiting and watching...”⁵⁴ In writing our own history, we must make self-conscious commitment to multivocality, forcing no silences. “The past must not be a burden but a release.... History in the present is not about burden or mourning; it is about accounting for the population of the dead.”⁵⁵ In our improvised world, all voices must be heard in order to sustain the forward movement and swing.

⁵⁰ See Kate Connolly, *All Das Jazz*.

⁵¹ Penny M. Von Eschen, “The Goodwill Ambassador: Duke Ellington and Black Worldliness” in Casey Nelson Blake’s, The Arts of Democracy: 166.

⁵²Von Eschen, 166.

⁵³ Albert Murray. The Hero and the Blues. New York, Vintage Books: 13.

⁵⁴ Albert Murray. Stomping the Blues: 258.

⁵⁵ Bogues, 116.