

Musical diplomacy

Perfect pitch

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An encore for the jazz ambassadors

IN 1956, when the cold war was at its peak, America deployed a “secret sonic weapon”, as a newspaper headline put it at the time. That weapon was Dizzy Gillespie, a famed jazz musician, who was given the task of changing the world’s view of American culture through rhythm and syncopation. Crowds poured into the street to dance. Cultural diplomacy died down after the cold war ended. But the attacks of September 11th 2001 convinced the State Department to send out America’s musicians once again to woo hearts and minds with melody.

Rhythm Road, a programme run by the State Department and a non-profit organisation, Jazz at Lincoln Centre, has made informal diplomats out of both musicians and audiences. Since it began in 2005, musicians have travelled to 96 countries. One band went to Mauritania after last year’s coup; many depart for countries that have strained relationships with America. The musicians travel to places where some people have never seen an American.

Jazz, so participants in the programme attest, is well-suited to diplomacy. It is collaborative, allowing individuals both to harmonise and play solo—much like a democracy, says Ari Roland, who plays bass for a band that left New York to tour the Middle East on March 31st. Jazz is also a reminder of music’s power. It helped break down racial barriers, as enthusiasts of all colours gathered to listen to jazz when segregation was still the law of the land.

The State Department spent \$10m on cultural diplomacy programmes in the year to September 30th 2008. But most expect funding for the initiative to increase under Barack Obama, who pledged his support for cultural diplomacy during his campaign. Rhythm Road now sends out hip-hop and bluegrass bands as well.

There are some dissenters. Nick Cull, the director of the Public Diplomacy Programme at the University of Southern California, thinks that these diplomatic projects would be more productive if they were not administered by the same agency that oversees the country’s foreign-policy agenda. And there is also clamour for Mr Obama to appoint a secretary of culture in his cabinet. What good, they ask, is sending American culture abroad, when the country is not giving it proper attention at home?