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Alvin Atkinson & The Sound Merchants Kick Off The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad Tour to Russia and Central Asia

WHO/WHAT: Alvin Atkinson & The Sound Merchants, comprised of Alvin Atkinson, Jr. on drums, Lakecia Benjamin on saxophone, Sean Higgins on piano and Ameen Saleem on bass, will tour with The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad program, co-produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Over the past two years, the program has presented 17 tours visiting 120 cities, in 66 countries, on 5 continents.

WHEN: May 27 - June 26, 2008*

WHERE: BELARUS: (May 27-31); MOSCOW & ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA: (June 1-15,); KYRGYZSTAN (June 16-20); VLADIVOSTOK, RUSSIA: (June 22-26)*

*Dates and locations subject to change

HOW: Please visit **The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad** at www.jalc.org/TheRoad for more information on this program. In

addition, you can listen to music and stories about the program for free on Jazz at Lincoln Center Radio at

<http://www.jalc.org/jazzcast/program.asp?programNumber=205>

BACKGROUND:

The program, produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, is designed to foster cultural exchange with audiences worldwide. Between Fall 2007 and Spring 2008, six jazz quartets and four urban music ensembles are visiting regions including Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Participating bands were selected from a national pool of applicants in a competitive audition process.

International tour activities include public concerts, master classes, lecture-demonstrations, workshops, jam sessions, media outreach and collaborations with local musicians. The program also incorporates free performances by each quartet hosted by Jazz at Lincoln Center at Dizzy's Club *Coca-Cola* in New York and at The National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C.

"Cultural diplomacy allows artists and audiences to share in a common experience that reaches beyond differences in culture, religion, language and generations and to connect as people without borders," said Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Professional and Cultural Exchanges Alina L. Romanowski.

"In the historic tradition of such musical alumni as Armstrong, Ellington, and Gillespie, these tours focus on diverse geographic audiences and the dynamic interaction born of music. The emphasis on education as well as performance leads to powerful exchange for our audiences and musicians alike," said Susan John, Director of Touring for Jazz at Lincoln Center.

CONTACT:

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ALVIN ATKINSON & THE SOUND MERCHANTS integrate jazz and blues influences with inflections of rhythms and melodies from around the world. The group's mission is to exchange their spirit and music with audiences worldwide as literal merchants of sound.

Alvin Atkinson, Jr. (drums) has been balancing a career as a performer and an educator for over 15 years, playing alongside artists such as Houston Person, James Carter, and Cecil Bridgewater, among others. Atkinson also has performed at the White House for President George W. Bush and as the house drummer for the *Emeril Live* television show on the Food Network. He has toured domestically and internationally and has participated in U.S. State Department tours of Africa, South America, and the Middle East. He currently teaches Jazz Language and Rhythm Studies at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Middle School Jazz Academy. He also serves on the audition committee and the sophomore jury committee at The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York City.

Lakecia Benjamin (saxophone) is a multi-faceted saxophonist born and raised in New York City. Incorporating the musical styles of jazz, R&B and funk, she plays with various ensembles and has performed all over the world. A graduate of the renowned LaGuardia High School for Music & Art and the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, Benjamin has played with artists including Clark Terry, John Hicks, Joanne Brackeen, and Rachel Z., among others. She regularly participates in workshops and concerts at public schools and is involved in various community events through ArtsConnection and Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Sean Higgins (piano) earned his B.M. in Jazz Performance at University of North Carolina at Wilmington and his master's degree at Northern Illinois University. In addition to touring with Jazz at Lincoln Center's The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad Program to the Middle East in 2007, Higgins has played at the 2006 Vail Jazz Festival, Shanghai Jazz and many New York City jazz clubs. He has shared the stage with Charles McPherson, Russell Malone and Wycliffe Gordon and is currently a member of the world-renowned Winard Harper Sextet, appearing on the groups' latest CD, entitled *Make It Happen*. Higgins recently released *The New Thought*, his debut album.

Ameen Saleem (bass) began studying music at the Duke Ellington School for the Arts in his hometown of Washington, D.C. After touring domestically and internationally with his school's ensemble and the D.C. Youth Orchestra, Saleem continued his education at North Carolina Central. Over the course of his career he has played at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Carolina Jazz Festival, North Sea Jazz Festival, Jazz a Vienne in France and Grady Tate Jazz Festival. In 2004 he toured South America under the auspices of the U.S. State Department. He currently performs and records with a wide range of talented musicians, including Jimmy Heath, Nicholas Payton, Lonnie Liston Smith, Gene Carne, Antonio Hart and Winard Harper.

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Jazz at Lincoln Center is dedicated to inspiring and growing audiences for jazz. With the world-renowned Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and a comprehensive array of guest artists, Jazz at Lincoln Center advances a unique vision for the continued development of the art of jazz by producing a year-round schedule of performance, education and broadcast events for audiences of all ages. These productions include concerts, national and international tours, residencies, weekly national radio and television programs, recordings, publications, an annual high school jazz band competition and festival, a band director academy, a jazz appreciation curriculum for children, advanced training through the Juilliard Institute for Jazz Studies, music publishing, children's concerts, lectures, adult education courses and student and educator workshops. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln Center will produce nearly 2,000 events during its 2007-08 season in its home in New York City, Frederick P. Rose Hall, and around the world. For more information, visit www.jalc.org.

U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs promotes mutual understanding between the United States and other countries through international educational and exchange programs. Through its Cultural Programs Division, the Bureau supports a variety of cultural exchanges programs that support U.S. foreign policy, foster America's artistic excellence, and demonstrate America's respect and appreciation for other cultures and traditions. The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad program presents selected professional American performers of jazz and urban music on concert tours in countries with limited exposure to live American culture. For more information, visit <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/culture/index.htm>.

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For more information please visit <http://www.jalc.org/TheRoad>

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The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad program is made possible with underwriting support from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State.

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