

Celebrating Jazz Diplomacy

Posted by [David T. Killion](#)

May 4, 2013

During the four years I have served as U.S. Ambassador at UNESCO, my staff and I have accomplished a lot of things that I'm proud of, but [International Jazz Day](#) is definitely one of our crowning achievements. The State Department has long recognized jazz as an important instrument of soft power; at the height of the Cold War, we sent jazz legends like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman all over the world, and we continue to promote jazz abroad through programs such as Rhythm Road. But International Jazz Day has taken jazz diplomacy to a whole new level. On April 30, 2013, just one year after it was launched, [International Jazz Day](#) was [celebrated](#) in every single country on earth. Thanks to our engagement in UNESCO, jazz diplomacy has literally become global, reaching places where traditional diplomacy cannot. International Jazz Day shows us that still today, nothing transcends political and cultural differences like jazz.

As jazz singer Gregory Porter pointed out during the International Jazz Day festivities in Paris this year, "Jazz is a music that reaches out into the far corners of the world." But why is this exactly? What makes it so attractive to other cultures? I think the reason is two-fold. First, there is its history. Jazz music was born in the Southern United States, in the shadow of slavery and the suffocating grip of segregation; a desire for transcendence, justice, and freedom is part of its DNA. The story and spirit of jazz touch on something universal and continue to inspire people of all backgrounds and nationalities.

The second reason has to do with form. Improvisation, the defining element of jazz, encourages experimentation and innovation, making it penetrable to all types of musical traditions. Then there's the balance between individual freedom and responsibility to the group, which I believe also touches on something universal. Jazz gives musicians the freedom to interpret a given melody but it also requires that they listen closely and adapt to the other members of the group. At its best, jazz teaches us how to thrive both as individuals and as a collective.

If you think about it, good jazz is like good diplomacy: intuitive, adaptive, inventive, and transcendent.