

Jazz as art – and diplomacy

Music is a unifying art form, one that offers powerful lessons about the importance of diversity, innovation, and a commitment to collaborating as an ensemble. As we celebrate the United Nations International Jazz Day on April 30 and look toward the 60th Anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival this summer, we should consider these lessons and apply them to build a better, more united community at home and abroad.

National anthems rally countrymen together in song. The somber notes of “Taps” and “Amazing Grace” can signal to all in earshot grieving and loss. Benefit concerts – from small community performances to globally reaching pop music festivals – tap into the power of music to bring people together; to connect cultures; to support struggling farmers; to feed the hungry; to serve a mission.

An art form with such power is a tool for better global relationships. A tool for cultural diplomacy.

Jazz was birthed in the late 19th Century along the deltas of the Mississippi and brought to age in a Golden Era that spanned half the 1900s. This uniquely American tradition transcends simply great music. Throughout its history, it has been a positive, unifying force celebrating diversity and freedom.

Born in the shadow of slavery, jazz was known as the melting pot of sound, combining a unique mix of military marching bands, blues, church music, ragtime, and folk music. One of its hallmarks is improvisation, in which participants express their creativity and individuality while creating a cohesive whole. Which provides a perfect metaphor for bringing people of all cultures and walks of life together, uniting communities and enhancing lives around the world. It is this unifying quality – of music generally but jazz in particular – that can drive a real mission of cultural diplomacy. Jazz diplomacy.

We have long seen and believed in the original American art form of jazz as a tool for cross-cultural connections and diplomacy. It’s a belief we share with many others and one that we celebrate through International Jazz Day, first established by the United Nations in 2011.

Its purpose is to highlight the diplomatic role jazz has played in uniting cultures and promoting peace, freedom of expression and diversity. Just one year after its launch, International Jazz Day was celebrated in some way by every country on Earth.

Jazz diplomacy is not a new idea. But it’s an important one. As the U.S. State Department notes, “a desire for transcendence, justice, and freedom is part of its DNA.” We can learn a lot from past jazz diplomacy efforts. For example, at the height of the Cold War, the U.S. sent jazz legends such as Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman to countries all over the world to help ease tensions and promote better communication through music.

In Rhode Island, that mission of jazz diplomacy has been carried out for the past six decades through the Newport Jazz Festival, which brings together thousands of musicians and jazz enthusiasts of all ages from across the globe.

As lead sponsor of the Newport Jazz festival and to coincide with its 60th anniversary, Natixis Global Asset Management has launched the “2014 Jazz Diplomacy Project.” It’s an initiative centered on the power of jazz, and it includes a series of events at the National Archives, in Newport, and a summer concert series in Boston that culminates with the Berklee Beantown Jazz Festival.

The 2014 Jazz Diplomacy Project was conceived with this great tradition in mind. America has a history of exporting the best that genre has to offer. Now it’s time that we apply some of these themes to tackle pressing challenges here at home. In an era of growing polarization and withering collaboration, we can learn a lot from jazz – most importantly

how to fuse different ideas to overcome complex problems. Jazz diplomacy can be a common thread as our country struggles to make important decisions ranging from budgets to the economy to immigration and education.

It is also the key as we promote the future of the art form and the next generation of jazz diplomacy with scholarships for three aspiring jazz musicians; and discuss at the National Archives how sending America's music to the rest of the world has been a diplomatic victory.

Music is a unifying force. Jazz is an original musical art form. Cultural and communication barriers can be overcome through this special form of diplomacy.

Hailer is the president and CEO of Natixis Global Asset Management – the Americas and Asia, and chairman of the New England Council.