Jazz Backstory

Episode 23 — Jazz International, Part 1

On a whim, while preparing our 23rd Episode, I searched online for the answer to this question: What is America's most significant export? I can report that the results on Google are totally wrong. And this was typical, from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the Top 5 U.S. Exports:

Refined petroleum; petroleum gas; crude petroleum; cars; and integrated circuits.

Wrong! Everyone knows America's most significant export is its music. Which leads us to our topic for this Jazz Backstory episode and the next, Jazz International.

Some years ago, I presented a program on our interview project at the annual conference of the International Society of Music Educators in Glasgow, Scotland. On the first night I took a walk around the block and passed by a pub, a large picture window offered a view of a four piece band, rocking out for a raucous crowd. The tune? "The Wanderer," by Dion and the Belmonts of Brooklyn NY, the same song I had played on a gig three nights earlier in Utica NY.

Turn back the clock to 1958 when the musician and entertainer Steve Allen visited Russia. He took note that the house band in Moscow's Ukrania Hotel was performing tunes from the Great American Songbook: Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Duke Ellington.

A current American marketing and branding phrase in the arts is World Music, indicating music from somewhere else. There is now a World Music Day, every June 21st. It's clear to me that shortly after an innovation in music occurs in America, it swiftly becomes World Music, adopted and performed on every continent.

1917 marked the first jazz recording in America and the raucous style made its presence known across the pond in swift fashion. By the end of the 1920s European musicians were emulating the style of the artists they heard on precious imported recordings. Jazz, built on meritocracy and bandstand equality held a particular fascination for musicians and the audiences living under an oppressive government. From our 1999 interview, Steve Allen relates the aforementioned experience in Cold War Russia.

SA: Sometime if we have more time I'll tell you about an album that I smuggled in to the Soviet Union at that time, and I didn't have to smuggle it, it was just in my underwear — I didn't have to swallow it and reconstitute it with water later. Leonard Feather, the noted jazz critic, got in touch with me, we were friends anyway in New York, and he said, "I

hear you're going to be in the Soviet Union in a few weeks?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Would you be willing," he said, "there might be some slight risk but I don't think so," he said, "Would you be willing to take an album that I would like to get delivered to the people who wrote the music?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll just pack it in my suitcase, and what do I do then? How will I know who they are?" So he said, "Well you might not be able to reach them," he said, "because it is a police state," but he said, "at least you can try." And he said, "There are always people over there who, despite the government's officials, like Americans and are willing to be civil, and some of them are hip, and they know the name of the local clubs where any jazz might be played. And if you could get to any of those clubs or talk to any people familiar with those clubs, and mention the name of these two musicians," and he gave me a piece of paper with two Russian gentlemen's names on it. So when we got to Moscow after hearing that American music was okay to be played there, I didn't get to talk to those musicians in that band that night, but after a few days with our official guides, who seemed very relaxed and pleasant, I began to ask about jazz in Moscow at least, and the word was well it's officially frowned upon but it happens, which happens with many things in life that are officially frowned upon. So I got the names of two or three clubs and they said, "they're not like jazz clubs in Paris or New York, they're just places where maybe a couple of nights a week some people come in and play a little jazz. In other words, jazz is not on the outside of the club. I finally was able to meet somebody who said, "Yeah I know who those guys are." And I said, "Great, big progress, could you give them a call and tell them I'm here at the Ukraina and tell them I have an album and I'm told they'll be very pleased to hear, and they'll have to take it from there because I don't know how to get to them." He said fine. So a couple of days later the phone rings at the hotel at my room, and the fellow is speaking naturally with a Russian accent, said, "Mr. Allen?" I said, "Yes." He said I am — whatever his name was — "I'm downstairs with my friend," — the other man's name — and he said, "We understand you have something for us?" I said, "I certainly do, and a pleasure to hear from you." I said, "Come on up." He said, "No we can't." You couldn't go to a foreigner's room in those days, the police would talk to you about it. So I said, "Fine, I'll come right down." And we did a little description of each other, because I don't think they knew who I was, they didn't see my shows in the Soviet Union and "The Benny

Goodman Story" hadn't gotten over there yet. So I said, "I'll be right down, I'll be carrying an album, that'll be one way you'll recognize me." Anyway I went downstairs, now here's the weird part of the story, there were maybe visible at the moment I descended the stairs, 250, 300 people. It's a big hotel with an enormous lobby. This is if you were in any big hotel. And believe it or not I picked the guys out immediately. Now you might say, you know they weren't wearing Zoot suits or carrying trumpets or any cartooney factors that might have accounted for my quick recognition. They just looked hip.

MR: Isn't that weird? Even in Russia.

SA: Yeah, even in Russia, and this was 1958, again, Cold War time. So I couldn't be sure that was them because somebody could have looked hip and been with the KGB, just something to throw me off. "Send our hippest man, we've got an American on the line." But sure enough it was them, they came up and smiled and they spoke some English, I spoke only about three words in Russian so we worked in English. And I gave them the stuff. And that's about the end of that story.

He gave them the stuff, jazz LPs. A fascinating story it, delivered with that mildly acidic Steve Allen humor. I recall being a bit concerned about measuring up to Mr. Allen's wit as shortly before the interview I had read his book entitled *Dumbth, The Lost Art of Thinking*, featuring tales of people acting without forethought or relevant knowledge, as in dumbthly. I avoided being a subject in Dumbth part 2 by recalling Count Basie's mantra "less is more." I said very little.

American music has had a profound effect in countries that have been our most significant adversaries. After multiple failed efforts in the 1980s, Dave Brubeck and his bandmates traveled to Russia in the name of cultural exchange. During our 2001 session, Mr. Brubeck spoke on jazz and freedom and the atmosphere in a Moscow ballroom.

DB: And we are, to me, the country with by far the most freedom. And an example — why does everyone want to come here? And you know I've traveled so much and in almost every country in the world. And there are times when we're hated you know. But they don't ever seem to hate jazz. You know? Of course you're getting a minority of people. But the idea of freedom, unless there's — if there's a dictator or a dictatorship, the first thing they're going to stop is jazz. Absolutely. Hitler stopped it immediately. Stalin

stopped it. I think it just gives the country, the people of a country, too much idea of what it would be like to be free. And you see that's the way jazz started, was the African-American getting freedom, being denied freedom, and it still goes back to those roots of getting freedom. And people just don't realize how little freedom there was. When you weren't — some people weren't allowed to speak but they would sing maybe or hum. Then, some way, they'll get through. And you see I've been through so many things where I've had to back off because freedom is so important that the people in the audience are going to be in trouble. And twice I had to cancel Russia because our ambassador said, "Dave, if you come the secret police are going to take everybody's name at the door and they'll lose all their privileges, and some of them are going to come anyway. They want to hear jazz and they want to hear you so badly." But then when there started to be cultural exchanges, Gorbachev and Reagan were starting to be friendly, then we're going to move again, like Eisenhower and some of the other presidents to cultural exchange, and Russians were given a list of who they could choose to come, and we suggested, the Reagans suggested who could come. And the Russians wanted me and Nancy Reagan wanted me to go. So we went with Air Force One, but there's four Air Force Ones flew. Four different planes. There were so many — press people in one plane and musicians in my bunch in another plane with a lot of other people. It was a real experience. But believe me, that room where we played was full of dissidents that Gorbachev had just let out of jail. You remember, if I got the name right, Sokolov had just been released? And Iola was sitting next to his wife who was I think a poet or a philosopher. And there were generals that had thrown these guys in jail, and they're all sitting at this big room, some at the same tables and our top diplomats were there and it was kind of a tense thing. And then it was time for us to play. That room came together. That whole room came together.

Mr. Brubeck, an emotional and passionate artist, could barely speak as he brought the story to its conclusion. I was struck by his recollection of being warned that Russian citizens who attended his concerts would have their names taken down and could lose all their privileges. This was not an idle warning. Trombonist Alan Raph experienced it during a concert with Gerry Mulligan's Jazz Orchestra in West Berlin. The Russian influence was pervasive, on both sides of the Wall.

AR: Well we had one very interesting experience at the Sports Palace in Berlin. This was 1961 I believe. Of course the war was over in '45. The Berlin Wall was still up. We played a concert and I guess the concert normal length was about two hours. So we were finishing it up, we had one or two encores that we were going to play. But after we did the last number, instead of applauding, half the audience got up and left. They just left. And we couldn't understand this. We found out later that these people were from East Berlin. They had a curfew. And they already stayed past their curfew. So if they all left together they had a chance of getting back to East Berlin without facing the authorities. So they all got up en masse and left. It was the weirdest thing. We thought they enjoyed the concert and here they are running out.

MR: But they gave you a pretty high compliment by staying that late.

AR: Oh yeah, they did. They actually stayed past their curfew because they were so interested in the music.

[audio interlude]

Repressive governments include jazz and Western pop music in their list of threats to their authority. Everyone having a say in a music ensemble might give the musicians and the audience ideas that would be harmful to the state. Drummer Ignacio Berroa was one of the 125,00 Cuban citizens that left their homeland during the 1980 Mariel Boat Lift.

MR: I wanted to ask you when you actually were on the boat coming from Cuba to Florida, can you go back and remember your state of mind? What were you thinking, what were you hoping for?

IB: Well first of all I was looking for freedom. In my case in particular my life in Cuba was unbearable. I never liked the system, just because the reason that I was not, I disagreed with the system that was against four guys from Liverpool with long hair and tight pants, three guitars and a drum. I don't know the message that they were conveying at that time because my English when I arrived into the United States, my English was zero. I had no clue about English language. So I don't know that what they were saying was "All you need is love," "I wanna hold your hand" and so forth and so on. But the Cuban government was against that music. So Cuban music was against people listening to John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker. Because they used to say that that was the music that represented the enemy, the enemy were the United States of America.

So I was against that because for me being 13 years old or 14, I understood why we had a strong revolution that was supposedly we were going to be free, well we're going to have a lot of things and the revolution was so strong, why to be afraid of some musicians, some lyrics or a genre of music or style of music like jazz. So immediately I went to the other side because my passion for jazz, my passion for jazz, the music that I wanted to play that's the music I love. So anyway after that moment I just wanted to leave the island. Because I knew my future wasn't in the country where I would not be allowed to express myself musically speaking. Let's put politics aside, musically speaking. So I always, my dream was always coming to the United States because the music that I wanted to play and my heroes were here.

[audio interlude]

There is certain aura about art and culture that comes from somewhere else. A concert hall in America might sell out when presenting a Balalaika ensemble from Russia or a Gamelan orchestra from Indonesia, while in their home countries this music would play a modest role. American jazz had a distinctive and exotic attraction abroad and its introduction to foreign countries sometimes occurred in unexpected ways. We spoke of significant American adversaries. Historically, Japan certainly qualifies. The American presence, post WW II can be directly attributed to the spread of jazz in Japan, an embracing of American music that has continued to present time. Two Japanese musicians shared their stories of hearing and learning jazz during this American occupation. First up, clarinetist Eiji Kitamura, interviewed in Los Angeles in 1999, during his annual U.S. concert tour. Key words to tune in for are foxtrot and "Sentimental Journey."

MR: How did jazz come to you in Japan? Was it through records?

EK: Yes. When I was 14 years old, a young boy, I had one record, an ESPY record. My father liked classic music, Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn, the old ESPY record, and then I found very small ESPY record, and I have that record. I was very surprised at that music. What kind of music, I saw a record label "Don't Be That Way" by Benny Goodman. But only this. And what kind of music — I didn't know jazz. And then I saw a record label, the fox trot, I mean, do you know? Fox trot.

MR: Oh fox trot. Yes, sure.

EK: But when I was 14 years old, I didn't know, what means fox trot? And then I understand that this music, the fox trot. And then I went in school and I told my schoolmates, I heard a very funny music, fox trot, by Benny Goodman. And they were very surprised. And this was my treasured record.

MR: You just had that one, that one record.

EK: Just one.

MR: Was there a tune on the other side?

EK: Um hum. On the other side, something, Benny Goodman trio plays something, the other, a very fast tempo number. But I liked "Don't Be That Way" with orchestra. And then when I was 16 years old, this second war ended. Japanese. And I had the Far East Network Radio, and they used to play jazz programs. And so I must play—

MR: You were hearing lots of fox trots, weren't you.

EK: Yes. And then I knew jazz music, and that I should begin some jazz music. And when I was a child I studied classic piano. And my mother likes classic, my father likes classic, and I played only classical piano. And then I wanted to play the clarinet like Benny Goodman.

MR: So were you self taught on the clarinet then in the beginning?

EK: Yeah. When I was 19 years old I played the clarinet. And it was very funny. My classmate, he got one clarinet, and he couldn't play the clarinet. Many classmates tried to learn to play it. And then I tried clarinet, to blow. "Oh Eiji's a genius." And then how to push key. I don't know, I found only two notes [scats]. Oh Eiji played "Sentimental Journey."

MR: Right. But you could only play the first few measures.

EK: And then my classmates said, "Eiji's a genius." And then I began the clarinet.

I love it. Even though we struggled a bit with the language barrier, or perhaps I should say, I struggled, the picture he painted is touching and informative. Eiji mentioned hearing jazz on the radio, courtesy of the Far East Network Radio, similar to the Armed Forces Radio Network in the WWII European theater. He also mentions the accepted music to study on the piano in Japan was European classical music. Eiji first modeled his playing after Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, he later copied and memorized the more modern improvisations of Buddy DeFranco. Here's a passage from my conversation with Eiji.

After Benny Goodman I found Artie Shaw's record, and then after that Buddy DeFranco records, and they were so different. A different experience of music. And then I copied maybe five albums I copied all his improvisation. And then it was a very funny story. I met Buddy DeFranco. He came to Japan, and I played for Buddy. Buddy say, "Eiji, are you professional or a student?" "Oh I'm professional." He say, "Stop my copy, and throw away your copied music, all of it, throw away. Eiji, you need your own improvisation. You need your originality". And then really I throw away all the music. And then we met, again in '76 he came to Japan. the Yamaha Corporation invited Buddy, and we played together. And Buddy say, "Eiji, you've got big success." He said to me, "Eiji you have your own style."

Not every jazz musician has been able to develop a signature sound, but it always will be a goal. Oh yes, by the way, our jazz vocabulary word. You have heard me end our podcasts with "see you on the flip side." Just in case we have younger listeners, it simply means flipping the record over to hear the B side as Eiji did with the Benny Goodman recording. Like most of us who had 45s, he preferred the A side.

[audio interlude]

From a sociology viewpoint, Toshiko Akiyoshi's story would make for a fascinating case study. Born in Japan, pre WW II, she spent her childhood in China where a daily routine included practicing European classical piano music. During our 1999 interview, Toshiko shared the introduction of yet another culture on her return to Japan.

MR: Was there a pretty strong United States presence in Japan—

TA: After the war?

MR: After the war.

TA: Yes.

MR: Is that how you heard jazz?

TA: Yes. Actually you know after the war ended, during the war at the time I was strictly prohibited from dance halls. Before the war there was a dance hall I understand. I was too little to know about that. But during the war there wasn't anything like that. It was a no-no for the country. So after World War II all of a sudden there's a dance hall. And Americans, you know they are sort of like classified Officers Club or NCO clubs, what have you, and those are even, I think it was an unwritten law I'm not quite sure I don't

think official but the black people, they'd have a black soldier's dance hall. And of course the Japanese wanted to dance too. So there was so many dance halls, and there wasn't that many musicians in Japan. So anybody who can play a little bit, they were immediately hired. So I took a job in a dance hall. And I think it was lucky for me, and for the Japanese people. And one of the Japanese young men, he's not young anymore now, every once in a while, his name is Mr. Figree, and he was a jazz record collector. And somehow he thought I had potentiality. So he invited me over to his home and played a traditional record. It's a kind of famous story. And he played the Teddy Wilson, "Sweet Lorraine." And I thought I wanted to play just like that. That's my first introduction. That was in 1947 I believe.

MR: So you went from wanting to play just like Mozart, to just like Teddy Wilson. That's good company. You could do a lot worse.

TA: Yeah.

MR: When was the first time that you might have had to deal with chord symbols, or just a lead sheet as opposed to a written score?

TA: When I got the job. As I said the manager asked me, I saw this "pianist wanted." So I go inside and the manager came out and he said, "Can you play piano?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well come in at 7:00 tonight" — it could be 6:00, it was early. And so I go there and I see five people. The band leader was an ex-Navy officer who played the violin. And there was a great — violin and accordion and drums and a piano, and alto saxophone. No bass. And that's the first time I saw a chord symbol. And I'd never seen them before. So I said, "What is this?" He said, "You don't know this?" I said, "No I don't." So he said, "Let me hear you play the piano." So I said well — I played a Sonata, Beethoven's number three [scats]. And he said, "Oh she can play piano." So he said, "Well just do what you think you can do and if you are here I'll teach you how to read a chord symbol the next day." That's what it was. And I really thought that that was jazz and that what it was, nothing but noisy, and I really didn't like it. But I had access to the piano in the afternoon, so that was wonderful. In the daytime I can just play piano, because the dance hall was only open in the evening. So from the first day, yeah.

MR: So then this person would show you what major seven meant and all those kinds of things.

TA: Yes. But I think probably he wasn't very informed either, when you look back. But those days, I thought everybody sounded better than myself so everybody, when they suggested to me to do something I did it.

MR: Sort it out later.

TA: Yes.

Toshiko eventually immigrated to the U.S. first attending the Berklee School of Music and eventually becoming a highly respected jazz arranger, pianist and leader of the Toshiko Akiyoshi Jazz Orchestra, which featured her husband, saxophonist Lew Tabackin.

If you had a bit of trouble catching some key phrases from Eiji and Toshiko, check out our accompanying episode transcript.

We'll wrap up Jazz Backstory Season 3 with our next episode, featuring more stories of the international presence of jazz and the players who were compelled to leave their homelands to pursue it.

See you on the flip side.