“Liberated from Serfdom”

Willis Conover and the Tallinn Jazz Festival of 1967

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The events of the 1967 Tallinn Jazz Festival were the culmination of years of American public diplomacy through jazz, the longest and most sustained example of which was Willis Conover’s radio program *Music USA* on the Voice of America (VOA). *Music USA* began at the end of 1954 as one hour of light popular music, followed by an hour of jazz. Both hours were later shortened to 45 minutes of music with news breaks interspersed, but Conover’s regular announcement that it was “time for jazz” in the second hour became a fixture in the lives of fans and musicians around the world. In the nations of the Warsaw Pact, the program was a reliable source of the latest developments in jazz amid limited access to Western commercial recordings. While the program started on a provisional basis with uncertain plans for the future, Conover’s commitment to quality, his personal network with major jazz musicians, and his prior experience as a leading jazz broadcaster in Washington DC increased the odds of success in public diplomacy using jazz, even as jazz and politics sometimes mixed like oil and water.

Conover’s own words and actions paint a picture of a man who loved jazz and wanted to share it, boundaries notwithstanding. As he had earlier assisted in the racial integration of the Washington DC club scene during the late 1940s (Conover, *CD 1*, Track 2), he showed a lifelong disdain for arbitrary conditions that separated people with a common passion for music, whether it be the color of one’s skin or geopolitical situations. This decision was at once principled and pragmatic, from the earliest days of his career, through his years at the VOA, and through struggles over his participation with the National Endowment for the Arts and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Breckenridge 124). Conover recognized that he existed in a lifelong catch-22 situation, because the perception of his actions depended upon the politics behind the eye of

the beholder, whether on Capitol Hill, in Moscow, or in the office politics of the VOA. If he talked about politics, there would be trouble. If he did not talk about politics, there would be trouble. Through a political lens, his every word and act could be taken with the assumption of bad faith, so it made sense to keep the focus on the music, when music was his purpose in the first place.

Conover's *via media* proved effective, both for his continued employment, and for the success of jazz in the musical diplomacy of the VOA. This chapter will present the Charles Lloyd Quartet's performance at the 1967 Tallinn Jazz Festival, which broke the "stagecraft" of prior jazz diplomacy with the Soviet Union, and proceeded despite numerous official attempts to derail it, as a case study in the effectiveness of Conover's approach over the twelve years since his VOA program began in 1955.

CONOVER'S BACKGROUND AND JAZZ MUSIC AS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Before *Music USA* began, several precedents worked in favor of jazz as an instrument of diplomacy. First, jazz already had a small, but dedicated audience in Central and Eastern Europe before the onset of the Cold War and even before and during World War II. Even in the Soviet Union itself, critic S. Frederick Starr describes a "Red Jazz Age" between 1932 and 1936 in which jazz especially flourished (107-10). The *New York Times* noted that "Each of the big hotels in Moscow has its own jazz band and dancing floor … [Many] Russians go there, especially on 'Red Saturday,' the night before their free day. Foreigners on these nights are decidedly in the minority … Jazz is staging a remarkable comeback in Soviet Russia after years of virtual prohibition" (qtd. in Starr 110-11). One American diplomat who was there to witness the popularity of jazz was Charles Bohlen, who later proposed what eventually became Willis Conover's *Music USA* (Starr 109-10).

While not officially banned, jazz was conditionally tolerated in the Soviet orbit insofar as it could be leveraged ideologically. Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak explains that

> [C]ultural forms at times could be considered proletarian and at other times bourgeois, [and] they were not necessarily defined by class … therefore, if jazz was clearly an example of bourgeois culture in some contexts, it did not have to be so in all contexts. This is why jazz was criticized but also tolerated. (166-67)

However, as Starr notes, the period of toleration that began in 1932 ended by 1936 amid other political developments in the USSR (163). Nevertheless, when the United States government decided to use jazz in public diplomacy, it did so out of a desire to continue cultivating an existing point of cultural contact.

Secondly, while Conover's *Music USA* was the most famous example of jazz in American diplomacy, it was neither VOA's nor Conover's first attempt. A *Washington Post* profile of Conover notes in 1951 that the radio host produced jazz programs for the VOA several years before the beginning of *Music USA* (Stein "Jockey" B11). One such example from 1949 survives on a broadcast transcription disc in the Willis Conover Collection (WCC) at the University of North Texas. Titled *American Jazz*, the program features Conover discussing and playing the music of Duke Ellington in English, with a parallel translation in Swedish following Conover's spoken segments (Conover, "American Jazz #1").

The US National Archives chronicle other jazz programs which came and went in the early 1950s. An early success came with Leonard Feather's *Jazz Club USA*, which ran from 1950 through 1952. The content of Feather's programs focused mainly on traditional and swing jazz, though a few programs also focused on more progressive sounds from Stan Kenton and Woody Herman, and Charlie Parker and Bud Powell do appear in the playlist. Still, the program summaries notably show a lack of emphasis on bebop, which was the most transformative force in modern jazz at the time. In addition, Feather's programs, and indeed Conover's *American Jazz*, contained no overt political content, which set a precedent for *Music USA*. Thus, Bohlen's proposed jazz program built on existing precursors in American public diplomacy for instrumentalizing jazz as a tool for public diplomacy. Bohlen knew there was a pre-existing audience in the USSR, where he understood jazz to be undergoing a renaissance after the death of Stalin.

Therefore, the Voice of America set about looking for a broadcaster. Their first choice was not Willis Conover, but a congenial sportscaster named Ray Michael. He was a competent broadcaster who went on to have a successful career in the region, but his specialty was not jazz. The long-term product of Michael's broadcast was likely to be serviceable, but unremarkable. Or, as Conover put it, "My feeling was, since I am not an expert in sports, that I would do a sports program about as well as he would do a jazz program, since my interest was not in sports and his was not in jazz" (qtd. by Groce 3).

However, Willis Conover had found out by chance that the VOA was looking for a jazz broadcaster at a point in his career where he would welcome a change. He had recently lost $12,000 (over $100,000 in the present day) through an unsuccessful concert promotion. Worse yet, his contract at WWDC radio was

not renewed after he lost his sponsor, Ballantine Ale. Conover's correspondence in 1954 hints at his dissatisfaction with the commercialism of WEAM radio and his struggles to play music he believed worthy of airplay. But WEAM was good for one development: It was there that he heard that the VOA had a program in need of a host (Conover, *CD 1*, Track 3).

Conover's career in the preceding 16 years had prepared him well for the position at the Voice of America. In 1939, Conover left college after one year at Salisbury State Teachers College in Maryland to work as an announcer at WTBO radio station in Western Maryland after winning an announcer's contest. It was during his time at WTBO that he discovered jazz via Charlie Barnet's recording of Billy May's arrangement of "Cherokee," and Billy May's arranging style led him to discover Duke Ellington (Conover, *CD 1*, Track 1). Conover was drafted in September of 1942, and served until February of 1946. His experience interviewing people on radio helped secure him a position as a classification specialist at Fort Meade in Maryland, keeping him close to Washington DC.

Conover's career in the capital city began when he saw an opportunity at the Stage Door Canteen in Washington, during a party where the selected music was not holding the crowd's interest. Selecting a better set of music, Conover caught the attention of the wife of a local broadcaster at WWDC (Conover, *CD 1*, Track 3). From there, Conover worked weekends at WWDC when on leave from the Army base, and hit the ground running as a full-time employee at WWDC when he completed his military service (Stein, "That Fatal" S8). In short order, Conover was interviewing major artists such as Duke Ellington, Peggy Lee, Stan Kenton, and others, building a network of contacts he later drew upon in arranging interviews for his VOA broadcast. Most of the guests he interviewed for the Voice of America were musicians he had interviewed or otherwise crossed paths with as a broadcaster or concert promoter, including Ellington, Lee, Kenton, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Billy Taylor, and Dizzy Gillespie (Feustle).

Conover's personal network and encyclopedic knowledge of jazz were unique assets he could offer the VOA, and which consequently set the show apart. His was not a mere token jazz program from the VOA, but one as good as any that one might hear on American radio. While musicians rightfully receive much of the attention as proof of Conover's impact, listening is not a passive act that leaves the hearer unaffected. In proposing the term "musicking," musicologist Christopher Small observed that listeners are intentional participants in the making of music. Indeed, they are participants in "musicking," either listening to a live ensemble or a recorded broadcast (Small). As Paddy Scannell notes, the success or failure of a program depends greatly on how it engages listeners as

participants, not as passive targets. Due to the immediacy of the human voice and its unique tone color in every individual, radio can be an intensely personal medium if used intentionally and sincerely. Scannell used as his main example Kate Smith's success in raising millions of dollars in War Bonds over the radio. Smith's sincerity made the message personal, and listeners were moved to contribute (Scannell).

The features identified by Small and Scannell resonate well with Conover's approach years earlier. Through his spoken word style, and in his approach to programming music, Conover engaged listeners as participants. In addition to the resonant, baritone timbre of his voice, Conover took care to remain intelligible amid linguistic and technological barriers. He spoke slowly and simply for the benefit of speakers of English as a second or third language. Conover's approach likely held the listeners' attention amid static and other interference on shortwave radio bands.

Musically, Conover also took particular care to include a balance of what he called "traditional, middle, and contemporary" jazz in planning the *Jazz Hour*, so that the program itself had a balanced presentation of jazz styles. In browsing Conover's early playlists, one may accordingly find "T, M, and C" in the margins as he ensured that all were represented (WCC, Series 1, Sub-Series 1, Box 1). Such attention to detail was in response to the polarization of jazz audiences in the 1940s between traditionalism and modernism, concurrent with the revival of early New Orleans jazz styles and the advent of bebop. A dedicated disciple of Duke Ellington (Stein, "The Jockey's" B11), whose music spanned the 1920s onward, Conover was more disposed to see jazz from a perspective of continuity than rupture. As one who made his living broadcasting jazz, he also had an interest in not being pigeonholed as an advocate of any one subgenre to the exclusion of another. Conover also took care to craft a program with a holistic sense of progression to a climactic point, demonstrating that the broadcaster's curation of the program was an essential aspect of a quality program (*CD 1*, Track 3).

Regardless of other circumstances, the greatest chance *Music USA* had for success was that it was done well, and Conover was able to ensure that. At *Music USA*'s inception, no one could have imagined that it would continue for 41 years to outlive the Soviet Union. Nor could anyone be sure what "success" would look like. Conover's initial contract was for 80 programs—a number someone decided would be sufficient for the VOA to see how the show was received so VOA could cut its losses if the show were unsuccessful (WCC, Series 3, Sub-Series 1, Box 7). Initially, Conover's programs were broadcast on the weekend while Ray Michael had the weekdays, but by the middle of 1955, the roles had

reversed and Conover was the lead host. Different weekend hosts continued through 1961.

In addition to his handling of the music and spoken portions of the program, Conover had a further asset in his independence as a contractor. The number of programs per contract and the amount of compensation changed, but Conover remained an independent contractor with the Voice of America for the rest of his life. That relationship arose from the initial wait-and-see approach to the program: the VOA position started out as a side job for Conover, who continued to toil at WEAM for most of 1955. At the outset, *Music USA* had no indication of becoming the lifelong vocation it ultimately became. Though Conover was in his mid-30s when *Music USA* began, he decided for years to come that the benefits of being a contractor outweighed the obligations and liabilities of being a full-time employee of the US government. He was entirely in control of his time and pursuits, without concern for dual employment issues, and continued to pursue numerous other non-VOA projects throughout his career. Those projects, which survive in Conover's personal archive at the University of North Texas, included concert promotion, writing for newspapers and magazines, preparing liner notes, hosting concerts and television shows, narrating films, and working for other broadcasters, as he did in the early 1960s at WCBS, the flagship station of the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York City. Recording schedules show that Conover generally pre-recorded several programs in a span of one or two days at the VOA, leaving the rest of his time free to commute between Washington DC and his residence in New York City (WCC).

More importantly, remaining a contractor gave Conover maximum control over the content and nature of his programs for the Voice of America. Sacrificing a federal employee pension, and government-provided health care, Conover protected the integrity of his program. It was his program, and he could walk away with it. His independence provided a degree of separation from governmental involvement. As the dialogue at the end of this chapter demonstrates, he could always maintain that *Music USA* was not Uncle Sam telling people what to listen to and what to think about it, but, as with Leonard Feather's *Jazz Club USA*, it was an actual jazz expert brought in specifically to run a music broadcast as he saw fit.

With Conover's quality, independence, and sincere enthusiasm, *Music USA* gained improbable momentum. The program was initially aimed at the Soviet Union and its satellite nations, but radio waves do not stop at national borders. Rather, they travel impressive and surprising distances after dark, depending on atmospheric conditions. Therefore, early positive responses via listener mail

came from Yugoslavia and Poland, Denmark, Norway, Trinidad, Guatemala, India, and Australia (WCC, Series 3, Sub-Series 1, Box 7).

A memo from the VOA's John Wiggin to both Conover and Ray Michael in early 1956 instructs:

> Please plug on every program for two weeks that: *Music USA* is getting a lot of mail. We are very pleased with these letters and we will try to answer any questions on the program without identifying the sender. (WCC, Series 3, Sub-Series 1, Box 7)

Consequently, by the spring of 1956, *Music USA* was expanded to worldwide coverage ("Voice's Jazz Program" 1). Signs of success continued in the Warsaw Pact nations as well. In 1956, Ernest Nagy, the General Consul of the United States Embassy in Budapest recognized the difficulties jazz musicians faced in Hungary and rented the Hungarian Record Company's studio for a recording session of a group of Hungarian jazz musicians. According to the Embassy:

> At the time the Communist government had banned jazz. It could only be heard by secretly listening to the Voice of America's *Jazz Hour* program hosted by Mr. Willis Conover. Two employees of the Embassy smuggled the record to Mr. Conover … This recording of that 'Jazz From Hungary' program is one of the remaining links to Hungary's underground jazz scene of the 1950s. (*Revolutionary Jazz*)

Such a response points to the importance of Conover in particular, and not just any broadcaster, as an authoritative source of jazz, and it speaks to the personal connection Conover had made with his listeners.

The University of North Texas Music Library holds the only currently known complete recording (Conover, "Hungarian Jazz Guests"). The program's introductory material and playlist show that it was hurried into production after the violent suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. In a rare acknowledgement of political circumstances, Conover presented it as a symbol of solidarity with the anti-Soviet "freedom fighters" of Hungary. At the time, it was unknown how the musicians had fared after the uprising, i.e. if they were alive, imprisoned, or in hiding. It only emerged in late 2016 that they had been able to hear themselves on VOA and regarded it as a great achievement (Gorondi).

Still, just two years later, relations between the US and the Soviet Union had improved to a point that the two nations signed a cultural exchange agreement in 1958, paving the way for a sponsored tour of the Soviet Union by Benny Goodman in 1962 and numerous other events. When this window of opportunity opened, Conover and the Voice of America were not only ready to cover the

events, but they had helped prepare the ground by continuously cultivating audiences for jazz wherever the broadcasts were accessible. While some were casual fans, others developed a lifelong passion. Danielle Fosler-Lussier observes that "[t]he existence of these expert fans was likely due to another US propaganda effort: the broadcasting of American music on Voice of America radio, especially Willis Conover's *Music USA*" (87-88).

Crucially, however, *Music USA* did not facilitate a one-way conversation, but rather a two-way exchange. Beginning with his visit to Poland in 1959, Conover began broadcasting large segments of live jazz performances by overseas bands ("Recording Schedule", 1962-1973). This decision served to encourage the musicians, expose their work to a global audience wherever the VOA's signals reached, and demonstrate with evidence that a successful cultural exchange was taking place. From the series of *Music USA* broadcasts in Poland in 1959, highly skilled musicians were taking what they heard on Conover's program and making new music with it, participating in an exchange of jazz made increasingly global by Conover's propagation of international jazz artists on his program.

As jazz festivals such as Poland's Jazz Jamborees and the Prague Jazz Festival proliferated in Eastern Europe, Conover broadcast excerpts on his program, and reported back to American audiences on the festivals in magazines like *Down Beat*. He continued to devote multiple programs to events including the Warsaw Jazz Festivals of 1965 and 1966, Prague Jazz Festivals of 1965-1967, and the Bled, Yugoslavia, Barcelona, and Moscow jazz festivals of 1966 ("Recording Schedule", 1962-1973).

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE TALLINN JAZZ FESTIVAL

In 1967, Conover accompanied the Charles Lloyd Quartet[1] in their travels to the Soviet Union (Yurchak 181). According to *Down Beat* magazine, the Tallinn Jazz Festival was also the first time "live modern American jazz"—that is, post-bop jazz—had come to the Soviet Union through the inclusion of the quartet. From the outset, the quartet's invitation to the Soviet Union was fraught with uncertainty. A letter from Alexei Batashev to Conover dated 25 February 1967 shows that Lloyd was under consideration as a performer several months in advance, belying the impression that authorities' figuring out what to do with him was an *ad hoc* affair (WCC, Series 3, Sub-Series 1, Box 9b). Rather, the

1 Charles Lloyd (sax), Keith Jarrett (p), Ron McClure (b), and Jack DeJohnette (d) (Gitler 15).

officially-unofficial nature of Lloyd's trip had the practical effect of maintaining authorities' leverage in the transaction by keeping every decision conditional and subject to change.

Lloyd was technically welcome to attend as a tourist. It was a proverbial foot in the door, and a first step toward possibly being able to play. When Lloyd's manager, George Avakian, was told ten days before the departure date that no foreigners would be allowed to perform, he was ready to call off the trip. Then, they received official confirmation that they would be welcome, presumably as performers. An unnamed Soviet diplomat in New York claimed to Avakian that the group would not be welcome, and that the Soviet people "don't really like American jazz," but they received their visas and traveled anyway (Gitler 15).

Upon landing in Estonia, the group continued to experience what Ira Gitler called an "on again, off again routine, replete with bureaucratic excuses, and cries of scheduling difficulties" (15). Lloyd was asked to do a clinic or workshop, but insisted that he be allowed to play for people. The group was requested to do a TV show, but in an empty studio. On 12 May, the group was pulled off the program five minutes before they were scheduled to perform. While the official news organ *Izvestia* had announced the performance, the KGB prevailed, forcing organizers to reassert that Lloyd's group was to be there strictly as spectators (Starr 287), suddenly claiming they had "no official sanction" to let the group perform. Avakian was told that an eleven-man committee had called off the concert (Gitler 15). In a subsequent oral history, George Avakian adds that Willis Conover himself interceded to help make the performance happen (Avakian, Side F, Track 2).

Finally, on 14 May, the group performed and received an eight-minute and twenty-second ovation—from people who allegedly did not really like American jazz—to the horror of festival officials who admonished, "We are not children. Please sit down!" (Gitler 15). This loss of control had consequences. The festival's chief organizer, Heinrich Schultz (misspelled as "Henry Shults" in the cover notes to the album *Charles Lloyd in the Soviet Union*), saw his career grind to a sudden halt when he was removed from his position (Vermenich). Jazz writer William Minor notes that the festival was "a mark of Estonia's independence that they could hold such an event without official approval, but as a result, many of the city leaders were sacked, and [as of 1995] such a festival never occurred there again" (109).

Despite the consequences for the local leadership, the 1967 Tallinn Jazz Festival had achieved a lasting effect through the inclusion of what was then cutting-edge jazz to a live audience in spite of the authorities who tried in various ways to derail the Charles Lloyd Quartet's performance. *Down Beat* quoted

Avakian: "I had a strong sense of history. My feeling was involved with the young people of the audience. This was the music the young people wanted, not just a tour arranged by officials. My biggest hope is that we've opened a door that will stay open" (Gitler 15).

Avakian was not alone in this assessment. One may assess the Tallinn festival as a turning point for the musicians because they said so themselves: Fellow Soviet saxophonist Boris Ludmer went so far as to say that "[t]he Tallinn Festival liberated us [the musicians] from serfdom. We played one hundred percent differently after Tallinn" (Starr 286). It is not insignificant that the musicians saw the event as being so momentous: They were the most obvious and public participants in the music, and would feel the most impact of the negative reception of their music. Moreover, the reference to liberation from serfdom points to more than aesthetic liberation, but a social and psychological change.

TALLINN'S IMPACT IN THE EAST AND THE WEST

S. Frederick Starr elaborates on the turning point that Tallinn represented, noting that a full exchange of jazz culture with the Soviet Union had been lacking thus far: Official trips by Benny Goodman and Earl Hines were very isolated occasions, happening four years apart (1962 and 1966). There was also a disconnection between the USSR and other Warsaw Pact nations with American and European artists going quite freely to jazz festivals in Eastern and Central Europe, but only a few European artists going to the USSR. Therefore, with the Charles Lloyd Quartet, "the possibility of achieving in Tallinn what had not been accomplished through the official cultural exchanges was most appealing" (286). Since this exchange was not driven by governments, but by jazz musicians and fans, a milestone in cultural exchange occurred as the connection between musicians and listeners had taken on a momentum of its own. Through its persistence, the Charles Lloyd Quartet had broken the stagecraft of prior jazz diplomacy described by Starr, in which jazz was carefully managed for social acceptability and older forms of jazz, such as that of Benny Goodman, were favored.

Years of Conover's music-first approach made this breakthrough possible. He had said on numerous occasions that he did regard jazz as a microcosm of American society, and regarded it as an ideal cultural medium for that reason; to him, it spoke louder than words. He made similar statements over the years that were variations on a theme; in 1958, he told *High-Fidelity* magazine:

> Jazz . . . is a reflection of our national life. Americans can’t see that fact: we’re too close to it. To me, and I think to most people, democracy is a pattern of laws and customs by which we agree voluntarily to abide: within this fixed and clearly defined framework we have freedom. . . . People in other countries, in other political situations, detect this element of freedom in jazz. (Randal 88)

Similarly, he told *Time* in late 1966: “Jazz tells more about America than any American can realize. It bespeaks vitality, strength, social mobility; it’s a free music with its own discipline, but not an imposed, inhibiting discipline” (“Nation: Swinging Voice”). Still, Conover always strove to compartmentalize politics, writ large, from his work. In addition to excluding overt political content from his programs, he remained secretive about his political leanings, working equally well with the Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations. In a 1994 oral history with Billy Taylor, the interviewer, by noting Conover’s precarious health and lack of coverage, tried to goad Conover into discussing the political battle over healthcare as it was being debated during Bill Clinton’s first administration. Conover stopped Taylor outright, saying, “Dr. Taylor, never discuss politics or religion” (*CD 2*, Track 8).

Of course, Conover’s *via media* also met resistance. To paraphrase author Allen Furst (himself paraphrasing Trotsky), “you may not be interested in politics, but politics are interested in you” (“Leon Trotzky”). In a discussion with a Soviet gentleman he refers to as “V”, Conover’s desire to avoid politics was accordingly challenged on his trip to Tallinn, which aptly summarizes the intersection of Cold War politics and jazz (WCC, Series 3, Sub-Series 1, Box 15). In the same interview, Conover explained why he was in Tallinn: “To see the Soviet people I met in Prague again, and to listen to your music, and to write friendly words about your musicians whenever I can honestly do so.” V brought up Vietnam as a stumbling block between American and Soviet relations. In this private exchange, Conover was frank: “Well, if your government would take steps to solve its end of Vietnam, our government’s end would automatically go away.” He later added: “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Vietnam. It’s not that I can’t talk about it, but I didn’t come here for that reason.” An extended portion from the interview is particularly revealing:

V.: “Why did you come here?”
Conover: “I told you. To say hello and listen to your music. You think I’m here for political reasons?”
V.: “Everything is political.”
Conover: “Do you think I’m here for political reasons?”

V.: "Everything is politics."
Conover: "What do you mean? Are you saying that when Soviet dance troupes and concert pianists come to America, they've been sent by Russia for political reasons?"
V.: "Everything is politics."
Conover: "Then you believe that I've been sent here for politics."
V.: "I believe you are here for the reasons you say, but I still say that in effect your presence is political."
He later adds: "the fact that your music program is broadcast on the Voice of America makes it a political program."
Conover: "Would you be happier if I quit broadcasting *Music USA*?"
V. "No, but if only you were not broadcasting it on the Voice of America."
Conover (*sarcastically*): "Where do you want to hear it, on Radio Free Europe?"
Conover: "Seriously, what would you rather I did? I'm doing a pure music show. There isn't a political word in it. What can I do to make it 'less political' for you? The Voice of America decided to do a jazz program 13 years ago, partly because they knew there were people in other countries who would like to hear jazz and partly because jazz began as an American music and so the Voice of America should broadcast jazz to show something of what our people do. Because I was in domestic radio and because jazz was my hobby, I wound up doing a jazz radio program for the Voice of America." … "What should I say to them: 'No, I won't do a music program because somebody in Russia would think it's political?" (WCC, Series 3, Sub-series 1, Box 15)

It is unclear if V. is serious or needling Conover for a reaction, as V. goes on to maintain that Conover surely could have broadcast jazz on Radio Moscow thirteen years prior, but only for a month.

Nevertheless, Conover made a valid point: He was subject to criticism and scrutiny no matter what he did, but it was not about to stop him from doing the radio program he wanted to do. In the same archival box as Conover's transcribed dialogue with "V," there is another scrap of writing—one of many on which he jotted down random thoughts and observations as he found the words to express them. It is a generalized summary of his reaction to the personal and professional costs of persevering in what he believed to be the right course of action: Even if he did not "win" in attaining the approval of others and any esteem or material benefit that might follow, he remained true to himself. It is fitting in light of the foregoing dialogue with "V.":

You can't win their way.
You can't win negatively: doing what won't offend them.
That way, you can't win.

So, do it the best of your way:
You may not win your way,
But you may win … Anyway, your way you have a 50/50 chance of winning; their way, you can't win. Do it your way, wholeheartedly. (WCC, Series 3, sub-series 1, Box 15)

Conover indeed did it his way, wholeheartedly, and it was his approach, his authority as a jazz broadcaster, and even his own intercession in Tallinn (Avakian, Side F, Track 2) that set the stage for the Charles Lloyd Quartet's groundbreaking performance at the Tallinn Jazz Festival of 1967. The festival thus marked years of Conover's work as an ambassador for jazz coming to fruition.

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