

# Rock, Rap, Hip Hop and All That U.S. Jazz Diplomacy

Arabs and their friends seem very fond of rocks. On July 3, 2000 Edward Said, the University Professor of English at Columbia University, illustrated that fondness when he, unaware his actions were being photographed, joined the familiar chorus of those shouting insults and throwing rocks at Israel at the Lebanese-Israeli border, 30 feet away.

Said, after being caught, explained his unscholarly behavior as a “symbolic act.” More honest and less symbolic than the University professor was the *Facebook* page of Fatah of November 2, 2015 that featured a masked Palestinian throwing a rock with a slingshot against Israelis. Two days later, a Palestinian cartoon appeared with the caption, “The rock is the best friend ever” of Palestinians.

Palestinians are still using rock in their effort to injure or kill Israeli civilians. But other Arabs and Muslims, if not devotees of rock music, are using another anti-traditional form of music, rap music and hip hop, for other purposes. Originating in black areas of New York, American hip-hop was originally viewed as a threat to Muslim countries and culture and was censured. Now hip-hop is present everywhere and easily available on the Internet.

Earlier during the period of the Cold War, jazz music had played a role in U.S. soft diplomacy. The U.S. was eager to overcome accusations, especially those promoted by the Soviet Union, of racism and segregation in the country. The State Department therefore sponsored a variety of U.S. cultural achievements emphasizing American positive achievements.

American symphony orchestras and ballet companies, however distinguished, were not representative of American parentage.

But jazz was originally a uniquely American musical form, and one largely stemming from African American culture.

In the 1950s, the State Department, eager to counter the critics of American racism and to establish good relations with African and Middle Eastern countries, along with Afghanistan and Pakistan, arranged tours by prominent jazz musicians.

The first tour was an attempt to illustrate that American cultural life was partly related to African Americans. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in 1955 remarked to President Eisenhower, "one dark face from the US is of as much value as millions of dollars in economic aid."

That first tour was by Dizzy Gillespie, the brilliant entertaining, and humorous trumpeter, originally from South Carolina, who was one of the leading figures in the development of a new form of jazz, bebop. Gillespie in March 1956 took his eighteen-piece band, including Quincy Jones, two women, and a Jew whose visa had to be listed as Christian, to Abadan, Iran.

Two years later, in July 1958 the Dave Brubeck Quartet played in Iraq. Other tours for propaganda purposes to present a positive image of the U.S. were by important performers including jazz giants such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman.

These jazz tours in the 1950s and 1960s were enthusiastically greeted. They had some success by portraying the U.S. as making racial progress and being anti-colonial, in contrast to Britain and France, even if they did not, as Dave Brubeck suggested, help end the Cold War with the Soviet Union. But another style entered the musical scene, and American foreign policy changed after 9/11.

To the consternation of lovers of traditional jazz and the Great American Songbook, the styles of rock, rap, and hip-hop

became popular with youth, first in the U.S. and then in the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East. It was Karen Hughes, U.S. undersecretary of State in the George W. Bush administration, who in 2005 thought the new American music might help change Muslim perceptions of the U.S.

A new jazz initiative in a program called Rhythm Rd began using hip-hop, regarded as the music of blacks, with performers, rappers, and dancers, for diplomatic and counterterrorism purposes, and to build bridges in the Middle East Africa, and Asia. Ironically, the protest music that sprang from U.S. Muslims living in inner city areas, prone to violence, and focused on struggle against authority and criticism of American foreign policy, was being used for diplomacy in the effort to make the U.S. safer from terrorist threats.

Since Middle Eastern Muslim countries have developed their own taste for hip-hop music, the State Department emphasized the importance of Islam to its roots in America. Its program was part of the outreach to the Muslim world. Indeed, well-known U.S. performers such as Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, and Q-Tip, in their lyrics used Arabic phrases invoking Islam.

The U.S. State Department in the mid-2000s thus launched programs to counter negative perceptions of the U.S. in the Middle East and Africa. A major person has been Toni Blackman, the black rapper from California, an influential figure in the world of hip hop activism, who has been an American Cultural Specialist since 2001. She was sent by State to African and then to other countries to illustrate U.S. positive contributions to the world.

Another well-known hip hopper, Chen Lo, took a 4 member band in April 2010 to perform with local groups in seven Muslim countries and to establish a hip hop academy in Beirut. It is not likely that the visits of American rappers and rockers caused the "Arab Spring" revolts in December 2010. Yet it is

not coincidental that local rock and rap, were being played in Tunis, helping lead to the downfall of the ruler Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and to protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo against President Mubarak, in Bahrain, and in Benghazi. Many of the protests were based on a song written by a Tunisian rapper, El General, who was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of 2011.

Nevertheless, the rappers are not jazz giants or have star power like Gillespie. Their lyrics do not posit a peaceful or democratic future, and are unlikely to help change perceptions of the U.S. as the earlier performers did. Rap and rock are largely “protest” music, including opposition to U.S. intervention in Muslim countries. Their performers are not the standard bearers of nonviolent behavior or of tolerance. Nor are they useful in illustrating the diversity of American life.

Throwing physical rocks against Israel is not conducive to peaceful relations in the Middle East. Neither is the use of musical rock, rap, and hip hop. The State Department should think again about the usefulness of this type for diplomatic purposes.

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