

Madeleine Albright on Jazz, Diplomacy, and Vaclav Havel's Rhythmic Deficiencies

SEPTEMBER 26, 2012

When **Madeleine Albright** took office as the 64th U.S. Secretary of State on January 23, 1997, she was at that moment the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government. But at the **Kennedy Center** on Saturday, she was just another performer awaiting a rehearsal cue in preparation for a Sunday night [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz](#) gala. Her magenta dress was adorned with a large pin, as has long been her style; in her book, "[Read My Pins](#)," she called the jewelry "part of my personal diplomatic arsenal." This one depicted two clarinets and a G-clef.

The Monk Institute event carried a theme, "Women, Music, and Diplomacy." On Sunday, following a jazz drumming competition and some star-studded performances, pianist **Herbie Hancock** and singer **Aretha Franklin** presented Albright with the Institute's Maria Fisher Founder's Award. Standing at a podium, she spoke about jazz's influence during Soviet rule in her birthplace, Czechoslovakia, and its relevance for cultural diplomacy today. She then sat down at a drum kit and joyfully wielded mallets while trumpeter **Chris Botti** performed an instrumental version of "Nessun dorma," the aria from the Puccini opera "Turandot." By evening's end, Albright could be seen in the lobby, chatting up musicians and clutching the drumsticks she'd taken as a keepsake. In the dressing room on Saturday, we discussed how she ended up onstage, and why.

So, you're getting ready to play the drums?

Yes, can you believe it? I can't.

When did your performance career start?

Well, my drumming performance career began last year, when Chris Botti was playing a concert at the Kennedy Center. I had heard him play at the White House at a State dinner for the Chinese president. We went to see Chris backstage before his concert and he said, "Sometimes, when someone well-known is in the audience, I ask them to play drums. Would you play drums?" And I said yes.

Had you ever sat at a drum kit before?

No. I sat up in the box during the whole performance, thinking about the rhythms and how they were played. But my performance career began long before that. I've done lots of things you'd never think a Secretary of State would do. Right after I took office, there was a meeting in Asia. Someone in the State Department told me, "You realize that each year, everyone puts on a skit.

And the U.S. always does poorly.” Someone gave me lyrics to “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and I said, “No, I won’t do this.” We decided that I would sing, “Don’t Cry for Me, Asia.” I dressed up like Madonna. We had fabulous lyrics, very funny. And that was the beginning of my performance career.

Can you carry a tune?

I can. I studied piano as a girl. And when I was quite little, my parents took me to “Madame Butterfly,” and I decided that I wanted to be an opera singer. But I wasn’t good enough. I did sing in glee clubs, though.

Did you have any other notable performances as Secretary of State?

The Russian Prime Minister, Yevgeny Premkov, had some skit that wasn’t much good. We decided to do a duet. We sang our version of “West Side Story.” It was the East-West Story. I came out singing, “The most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard... Yevgeny...” And he came out singing, “Madeleine Albright, Madeleine Albright, I just met a girl named...”

When did jazz enter your life?

Jazz entered in a very different way. As somebody who had always studied diplomacy, I could see what jazz did during Cold War. There was no question that Louis Armstrong and others going to the Soviet Union and other places had a real impact.

I was born in Czechoslovakia. I used to go back in the 1980s, under auspices of the United States Information Agency, when I was a university professor. In that stage, during the Cold War, there was a group that had started as musicians and then became a political movement, called the Jazz Section. During one trip, around ’86, the people at our embassy arranged for me to meet the guy who was the head of it. It was the only sort of cloak-and-dagger thing I ever did. The embassy told me to go to a particular square in Prague. They told me, “Stand in front of this big wooden door and a man in a raincoat will come up to meet you. He will take you where you’re supposed to go.” So the man came up to me. We got on the metro in Prague and he took me to the Jazz Section headquarters. Both jazz and rock-and-roll were potent symbols there. I visibly saw the role of American music, jazz specifically, in terms of revolting against the regime. It was a way of expressing support and wanting to be part of the West without going out there and marching. And of course, Vaclav Havel loved music.

Yes, didn’t he and President Clinton bond famously through music?

I was ambassador to the U.N. at the time. Vaclav Havel had invited Clinton. President Havel wanted to bring President Clinton a saxophone. So the three of us, and others, went to a jazz club called Reduta. Havel gave Clinton the saxophone. President Clinton got up and played “My

Funny Valentine” and Havel got up there with a pair of maracas. Now, I never thought of maracas as a jazz instrument. But Havel had absolutely no rhythm.

Have these experiences changed how you think about the relationship between jazz and the kind of things you represented when you were in office?

First of all, I think jazz is obviously the most American kind of music. It has a very interesting history. It represents so much of the diversity of our roots, if you look at it from a diplomatic perspective. And then, if I were to analyze it philosophically, there’s so much freedom in its form. And there’s the fact that it comes from African American roots but is played by some many different kinds of people. For me, it represents the best picture of America. Now, people talk about soft power. I’m a naturalized American. I’m very patriotic, and proud of American history and culture.

How did you get involved with the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz?

My chief of staff brought the organization to my attention. When I was Secretary of State, we arranged to host the whole operation the night before the gala concert at the State Department. I had decided it was worth pushing something we call cultural diplomacy. We spent a lot of time on that. I love doing cultural diplomacy. The hard part for anyone involved is that it may look to some as though you’re not serious. I think it’s a very serious form of diplomacy. It is part of a diplomatic toolkit. One can go into a country and have very tough conversation. You may use or threaten to use force. But one thing you do first is try to get to know people through their culture.

During the Clinton administration, was the president’s love of jazz infectious?

The thing he’d do is, whenever there was a State dinner, he’d have some musician in the first row. He just loved music, period. In Russia, in 2000, Putin hosted a concert for President Clinton. They played a lot of jazz, there were a lot of older Russian musicians. Putin sat dead straight but President Clinton, he couldn’t keep still.