Gene Lees Ad Libitum

Jazzletter

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Mail Bag

I want the whole world to subscribe to the *Jazzletter*. Unfortunately I don't have that kind of dough. But I *would* like to give three gift subs.

John Clayton, Alta Dena, California

Don't you dare even think about leaving all of us addicts beached and gasping in this "vast wasteland" of crap.

Johnny Mandel, Malibu, California

In Memoriam: Willis Conover

I wrote about Willis Conover twice in the 1990s. Now he has been gone for seven years, and I think it is time to take a longer look at his life and his immense contribution to his country and to music. If some of what follows in part repeats what I wrote earlier, my apologies. But it all needs to be said.

I gave this idea a good deal of thought before I began to bounce it off a few friends and colleagues for reaction. I first considered how many presidents had come and gone since the end of World War II: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton. And I thought of all the famous Cold Warriors, McNamara, Dulles, MacArthur, Westmoreland. Which American did the most to break the Soviet Union? Truman with his Korean War? Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon with their Viet Nam War? Reagan with his corny actor's reading of "Tear down this wall, Mr Gorbachev"?

None of the above. The man who did the most to bring down the Soviet Union was one of the unsung heroes, a handsome and beautifully-spoken broadcaster named Willis Conover, whose name was known in every country in the world but his own. Willis Conover was far and away the best-known American on this planet, and the most loved, except in his own country. That's because, unless you listened to short-wave radio, you couldn't receive his programs in the United States. Conover was heard on the Voice of America, a government-funded service whose mandate forbids its broadcasting to the land of its origin, and thus Americans could not hear Conover's marvelous music shows, even though they paid for them. Since he taped the first VOA broadcast in December 1954, and it was aired in January 1955, Conover was on the air longer than any jazz broadcaster in the world: 42 years.

The Voice of America was born during World War II as a counter-force to Nazi propaganda, a little like the BBC overseas service. After the war, as the adversarial relationship of the United States shifted from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union, the VOA stayed on the air. It employed broadcasters speaking the languages of the countries who had fallen under the control of the USSR and whose own broadcasting systems were merely propaganda facilities of their governments. The VOA remained comparatively objective and accurate in its news reporting, though men in successive administrations eyed it hungrily. It is hard to know how much political interference it endured at various times. But I have the impression that wiser heads on the whole prevailed, realizing that the BBC maintained its immense credibility around the world precisely because its news was believed when the propaganda disseminated by dictatorships was not. I think that the VOA on the whole did its job honorably; it certainly did it well.

But whether you are telling the truth or lies, it matters little if no one is listening, and since you cannot force people in far-away lands to tune in, you must induce them to do so. During World War II, Allied troops in Europe listened to Lord Ha-Ha from Germany and those in the South Pacific to Tokyo Rose. They took the American music they were broadcasting and ignored the lies.

Even if the VOA was trying to disseminate truth, what was there to attract listeners in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and other countries?

A program called *Music USA*. Host: Willis Conover. He played the very best of American popular music and jazz, presenting it with a quiet authority. That authority was founded on unfailing taste and a knowledge of jazz that was

encyclopedic, as was his knowledge of the men and women who create it. In the old days of Jim and Andy's in New York, a bar much favored by musicians, Conover was a regular, and there wasn't a major jazz musician, nor many minor ones for that matter, whom Willis didn't know. He interviewed them year after year, editing the tapes into broadcasts. The collective broadcasts of Willis Conover are an American national treasure of inconceivable value.

Willis Clark Conover Jr. was born on December 18, 1920, in Buffalo, New York, the son, he said, of an army officer. This meant he grew up in various parts of the country. I gained the impression that his relations with his father were not good. His father wanted him to attend the Citadel, but Willis was adamant in refusing a military career. Early in his life he became enchanted by the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft, as, too, did I. I have never understood the fad for the poetry and prose of Edgar Allan Poe, which I find mannered, affected, and hollow. But Lovecraft's stories truly gave me the creeps, and so they did Willis. In his early teens he wrote Lovecraft a fan letter, which the author answered. This led to a correspondence that continued until Lovecraft's death, and in 1975 Willis published these letters in a book titled *Lovecraft at Last*.

Willis began his broadcasting career at the age of nineteen. He once described his first job at a radio station in the Washington, D.C., area. He painted a vivid picture of a steaming summer night, so hot that the windows of the station had to be left open, which allowed a vast variety of mosquitoes, moths, and other flying things to whirr around his head while he had to keep the turntable on which he was playing records from breaking down by holding something or other with both hands. He said it was horrible.

In the early 1940s, he acted to desegregate Washington. His part in this effort was to present musicians in nightclubs, insisting that blacks be admitted. He also produced a series of Saturday midnight concerts at the Howard Theater. His opposition to racism was lifelong, and deeply felt.

In a curious way, Conover — the name is Anglicized from something German, and one of his ancestors signed the Declaration of Independence — combined a vast cultural cosmopolitanism with a deep American patriotism. This made him the perfect spokesman for a country he loved to peoples he loved but whose governments he did not.

Whatever the incidental political effects his VOA broadcasts had, the musical influence of this man was awesome. Conover did more than any other human being to make jazz an international musical language. He modeled his speech, he told me, on that of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats". Speaking slowly so that those with little English could follow him, he introduced the music to people everywhere, inspiring countless musicians to learn to play it and laymen to appreciate it. If there is a vast audience for jazz abroad, it was to a large extent created by Conover. He turned people on to jazz all over the planet. He was the only non-musician to have that kind of influence, and his work showed just how powerful an educational medium broadcasting, in its proper use, can be. Time and time again, when you ask a jazz player from the erstwhile Iron Curtain countries how he became interested in jazz, you'll hear a variant on "Well, I heard Willis Conover's program and . . ."

Willis was heard eight times a week by an estimated 100 million persons. During the darkest days of the Cold War, many found some strange consolation in his broadcasts. One young Russian wrote him a poignant letter saying, "You are a source of strength when I am overwhelmed by pessimism, my dear idol." Willis treasured such letters.

People listened to his broadcasts even when they were forbidden to do so. They learned English from him. This opened worlds for them. The Butman brothers, Igor and Oleg, living in New York, told me that just about every announcer of jazz concerts in Russia affected Conover's slow, sonorous manner of speech.

He traveled to more than forty countries. He could not visit Poland without being mobbed. In 1982, he accompanied a group of jazz musicians to Moscow. Though there was no advance notice of the concert, 500 fans crowded a 400-seat auditorium to hear them. Willis stepped up to a microphone. He got no further than "Good evening" when the crowd, recognizing the voice, roared. One young man kissed his hand, saying, "If there is a god of jazz, it is you."

Willis remained apolitical throughout this career. He declined to join either Democratic or Republican clubs, a judicious course in a town where the payoff in jobs is one of its most iniquitous practices. This permitted him to survive in a position that was more important to the country than partisan appointments. Whenever some foreign dignitary was afforded a state dinner, and the current president needed entertainment for him — jazz, as often as not — Willis was called on to organize it. He did this I know not how many times. In 1969 he produced and narrated the White House concert in tribute to Duke Ellington's seventieth birthday. He was responsible for more than thirty concerts at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as well as concerts at Town Hall in New York, Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, and the

Whitney Museum. In 1969, he produced and narrated the New Orleans International Jazz Festival. He established and chaired the jazz panel for the National Endowment for the Arts, and served on the State Department Cultural Presentations subcommittee for jazz. Nor was this all that he did.

I remember an incident that occurred during the Kennedy administration. Willis was at the White House, organizing some event. He was in the oval office with Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's secretary. A phone call came through for him. It was his bank in New York. Willis was behind on taxes, and the Internal Revenue Service had frozen his account. He had a moment of panic. Lincoln told him to phone the IRS office in New York. And, she said, use *this* phone. Willis picked up the telephone and spoke to the girl at the switchboard. The head of the IRS in New York got a phone call from the White House on the president's personal line. The freeze on the bank account was lifted within minutes. That is the only occasion on which I can remember Willis using his not-inconsiderable clout.

Most significantly, he kept politics out of his broadcasts. He said some years ago, "I am not trying to overthrow governments. I am just sending out something wonderfully creative and human. If it makes people living under repressive regimes stand up a little straighter, so be it."

He generated around the world a mood of receptivity toward the United States. Music does that. My interest in France and the United States in part grew from interest in their music. Music is the language beyond language. And jazz is different from most musics.

I long ago realized that it is the analogy of democracy: freedom within a framework, a set of disciplines within which each participant is permitted to make his own idiosyncratic statement without impeding the utterances of his colleagues. Small wonder that dictators always hate it. If all the world could model itself on jazz, the horrors we keep living through would cease. That message of tolerance and understanding was always implicit in jazz. It certainly was not lost on the musicians of these other countries, and I doubt that it was lost on lay listeners, either. "Jazz is about freedom," Willis said constantly.

One of the careers Willis inspired is that of the pianist Adam Makowicz (pronounced ma-KO-vitch), born in Gnojnik, Czechoslovakia, August 18, 1940, of Polish parents. The town is near the Polish border, and things during the war were not as hard in Czechoslovakia as they were in Poland. The family stayed there until 1946, then returned to Poland. Adam grew up near Katowice, the capital of Silesia. He started studying music at the age of nine, and was headed for a career as a concert pianist. Enter Willis Conover. Adam said:

"Nobody knew about jazz at that time. Besides it was banned from public life. It was illegal music under the Nazis and under Stalin. My friends from music school told me about *Music USA*, which you could get on short-wave radio. I had a friend with a short-wave radio, and I found the program. It was Willis Conover, from Voice of America. It was the only source to learn about jazz."

Adam's parents were horrified that he wanted to abandon a concert-piano career, and such was the friction that he ran away from home and school, lived a desperate nomadic existence for two years before finding an underground club in Krakow where he could play jazz. "I played, practiced, or thought about jazz twenty-four hours a day," he said. And he kept an ear to the radio, absorbing from Willis Conover the music of Earl Hines, Benny Goodman, Benny Carter, Teddy Wilson, Erroll Garner, and new-found idol Art Tatum. "I was about eighteen when I started to play jazz in student clubs and friends' homes," he said.

"Art Tatum was, musically speaking, like my father. When I heard his music for the first time, and each time was like the first time, he really excited me."

Needless to say, when Adam eventually was able to move to the United States, Willis became one of his champions.

I first met Willis at the Newport Jazz Festival on the Fourth of July weekend in 1959. He had been its master of ceremonies since 1951, and continued in that role for more than a decade. I encountered a handsome man with dark-rimmed glasses and a magnificently rich voice. Like his fans in other countries, I was always struck by the beauty of his voice. I had only recently become editor of *Down Beat*, while Willis had an enormous reputation within the music profession, unknown though he was to the American public. He took an immediate liking to me, and I to him. In the next two or three years I became aware of the scope of his influence — and the scope of his decency. He was one of the most honorable men I ever met.

Toward the end of 1961, I left *Down Beat*. After a detour through Latin America, I moved to New York in July, 1962. My friend Art Farmer introduced me to that tavern of beloved memory on West 48th Street, Jim and Andy's. And there a casual acquaintanceship with Willis Conover grew into a deep friendship. I had translated some of the first of the Antonio Carlos Jobim songs from Portuguese into English, including

Quiet Nights. Jobim arrived in New York that autumn. We needed a demo on that tune. Willis at that time was broadcasting for CBS as well as VOA. (He had an apartment in New York and a house in Arlington, Virginia.) He set up a studio for us, and we made the demo. The guitarist was Jobim, the pianist was Bill Evans, and I was the singer. Willis for all practical purposes produced that session. I lost that tape in a fire early in the 1970s, and now Willis, Jobim, and Bill are gone.

That first year in New York was one of the most difficult of my life. I couldn't, as they say, get arrested. I couldn't sell my prose. I couldn't sell my songs. At any given moment I was ready to quit, scale back my dreams to the size of the apparent opportunities, leave New York and find some anonymous job somewhere.

No one encouraged me to persist more than Willis, in conversations at the bar or in those back booths on the east wall next to the two telephone booths in Jim and Andy's. Willis believed in me, even if I didn't. And he kept slipping me money to hang on with. Ten dollars here, twenty dollars there. I kept notes on those loans but Willis, I believe, thought of them as gifts and simply forgot them.

The time between the summer of 1962 and that of 1963 was one of the worst of my life. I was constantly desperate. Then things turned around for me. My first book was published. Tony Bennett and Mark Murphy became the first of many singers to record my songs. And I was seeing advances from them. One day I realized I had some money in the bank.

And Willis called. By then I could read his mood from the sound of his voice. I said, "What's the matter?"

Willis was married five times. I knew two of his wives, one an Arab princess whom he met at the Brussels World's Fair at a time when the United States still found it expedient to show him off, the other a publicist named Shirley Clarke. They lived a few blocks from me at the corner of Central Park West and, I think, West 82nd Street.

I do not know which of his several divorces he was going through when he made that melancholy phone call to me. And when I asked him what was wrong, he said that his wife's lawyer had said that if he didn't come up with a certain sum by Thursday — I think it was around twenty-five hundred dollars, and that of course was in 1963 money — he was going to take Willis's house in Arlington.

I said, as casually as I could, "Why don't you meet me at Jim and Andy's and we'll talk about it?"

On the way there I went by Chemical Bank and made a withdrawal in hundred-dollar bills. Willis and I sat down in the booth and ordered drinks. When they arrived I reached into my pocket and pulled out the cash. Vague memory says the amount was about $3,000. With a grand flourish I dropped it on the table.

"What is *that*?" Willis said.

"*That's* the money you lent me," I said. I will never forget the relief on his face.

I never paid a debt with more pleasure.

There was a small circle of close friends that included Willis, Alec Wilder, Helen Keane, me, Gerry Mulligan, and Judy Holliday. Once Willis showed me a card trick. He shuffled a deck of cards, put it on the table face down, and told me to separate the cards into the red and black suits by the feel of my fingertips. I did it, perfectly, and said in astonishment, "Is this some sort of demonstration of extrasensory perception or is it a trick?"

He said, "It's a trick." When I pressed him to show me how it was done, he said he couldn't. When he was in the army, one of his buddies, a professional magician, got drunk and showed him how to do it. In the sobriety of the following morning, he made Willis promise never to show it to anyone. And this is the measure of Willis: *he never did*.

He said to me that day, "Do you know how smart Judy Holliday really is? She hadn't gone five or ten cards down into the deck before she said, 'Oh, I see how it's done.' And she did."

When Judy died after a protracted struggle against cancer, we were all devastated, but no one of course as much as Mulligan. We were all worried about him. Willis organized a vigil. Throughout his waking hours, Gerry was in the company of Willis, the novelist Joseph Heller, or me. We never let him be alone.

Willis and Gerry were in Junior's, another of the musicians' bars in midtown Manhattan, having a quiet drink when the juke box emitted *The Party's Over*. It was Judy's song from *Bells Are Ringing*. Gerry, Willis told me later, said, "Oh God, that's all I needed," and put his head down on his arms on the bar.

I'm glad Willis was with him at that moment. And that vigil, again, tells you the kind of man Willis was.

After Shirley and Willis were divorced, her daughter Bunny, of whom Willis was immensely fond, died of a lingering respiratory disease. Then one of those manic bicycle deliverymen, riding on a sidewalk, knocked Shirley down. Her head hit the side of a building, or maybe the curb, and she slipped into a coma. She died a few days later. Needless to say, the man who killed her was never even identified.

On June 14, 1993, the House of Representatives paid tribute to Willis. At that point he had been presenting his *Music USA* program for thirty-eight years.

Lee Hamilton, Democrat of Indiana, and Robert Michel, Republican of Illinois, took part in the commendation, a review of the Conover career and a reading into the Congressional Record of a 1985 *Readers Digest* article that called Willis *The World's Favorite American*. The resolution was passed unanimously. But it was not enough.

Not long after the inauguration of Bill Clinton, the White House held a dinner honoring George Wein on the 40th anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival. It was really only the 39th anniversary of the festival. Thus the festival and *Music USA* are almost the same age, and of course Clinton did not hold a dinner honoring Willis Conover for *Music USA*.

The affair was a sort of junior jazz festival, held on the south lawn of the White House. Clinton, you will recall, purported to be a jazz fan, and demonstrated his devotion by (occasionally) playing some of the world's worst tenor on television. Indeed, he played a solo at his own inauguration, which people taped. A young tenor player at North Texas State University (as it was then) transcribed it, sending it to his friends with a note saying, "I can read it but I can't play it." The "dinner" at this White House affair was held under a vast tent, and the food was barbecue. The soggy Washington heat was almost unbearable. I ran into a lot of old friends and acquaintances, including Nat Hentoff and Whitney Balliett. Stanley Dance and his wife were also there. Indeed, it seemed that everyone in the country who had ever written about or done anything about jazz was in attendance, largely, I suppose, out of curiosity. The music was disorganized. Wynton Marsalis and his group played one his compositions, which with his customary humility he described as a tone poem. It was essentially *Three Blind Mice* without the first variation. It was pretty sad. Clark Terry and Red Rodney got up with fluegelhorns and carved him up badly. Joe Williams went onstage and pulled the whole thing back from the cluttered disaster it was threatening to become. The event was later edited into a broadcast on PBS.

But that is not what I remember most about that afternoon. Before the music began, I was talking to Nat Hentoff when someone came to our table and told me, "Willis Conover wants to see you." And I lit up. "Where is he?" I said eagerly. The man pointed past the rope line that had been set up to keep the press and local peasants away from us Important People. I think I recognized his dark-rimmed glasses first, for this wraith of a man was not the Willis Conover I knew. I knew he'd had bouts of cancer, but my handsome friend had become withered and terribly old. As I hurried toward him, I suddenly wondered why he was not one of the honored guests — the *most* honored guest. My God, aside from the VOA broadcasts, the White House had *used* him repeatedly over the years. Every event that involved jazz at the White House had been organized at the behest of each administration by Willis! What's more, since the event was in honor of the anniversary of the Newport Festival, why wasn't Willis, its original emcee, among these guests?

There were several guards on that rope line. Even before I spoke to Willis, I demanded to know why this man was being kept out. They didn't even know who he was. I said, "You're gonna let him in, or there are quite a few of us here who are going to raise more hell than you can imagine, and it will be *loud*." They let him in, finally, and we got a chair for him and he sat at our table.

I was dismayed to find Willis so fragile. I had not seen him in many years, though we talked from time to time on the telephone. And as I shook my old friend's hand, I thought, "Other than the musicians who created it, this man has done as much for jazz as anyone who ever lived."

I would be fascinated to see a dollar figure on what the Cold War cost the nations of the world, if anyone could ever compile one. In the end I wonder if it was all worth it; whether the Soviet Union would have collapsed anyway of its own inefficiency and the sheer weariness of its people with its long and tawdry tyranny.

I was musing on all this, after the White House party and after seeing Willis. The next day, I had a reunion with some of my old journalist friends from our *Louisville Times* days, one of whom was David Binder of the *New York Times*.

I decided to throw out my seemingly outrageous generality to see which of my realistic colleagues would shoot it down. I figured the one who would take issue with it would be Binder, who was then bureau chief in Washington for the *Times*, and had been the paper's correspondent in Germany. David speaks fluent German (among other languages), has a rich knowledge of the erstwhile Soviet bloc, and had just returned from Yugoslavia. David plays clarinet and knows about jazz. I made the remark:

"I think Willis Conover did more to crumble the Berlin wall and bring about collapse of the Soviet Empire than all the Cold War presidents put together."

And David, who has always prided himself on a cynical realism, to my amazement said, "I think you're probably

right."

The next day I took Willis to lunch. He was so weak, and ate little. I could only think of all he had done for me in my first days in New York. At the end of our lunch, I put him in a taxi. I had to help him get into it. I thought of a rainy night when he waited for me in the doorway of his apartment building in New York and paid for the taxi I couldn't afford so that I could sleep on his sofa. I had nowhere else to go.

I watched his taxi pull away.

I would never see him again.

Willis continued producing his shows for VOA until the end. He was with VOA from 1954 to 1996, forty-two years.

Under the first President Bush, there had been a move to get Willis the Medal of Freedom. Bush ignored it.

Now, under Clinton, several of us, including the noted lawyer (and, long ago, musician) Leonard Garment, who had been Richard Nixon's White House Counsel, mounted a fresh campaign to gain it for him before it was too late. We mustered considerable support, and mounted a letter campaign to Clinton. Clinton ignored it.

It turned out that Willis had no health insurance: he was never on staff at VOA but did his broadcasts as a contract supplier.

He died May 17, 1996, in a hospital in Arlington, Virginia.

I am haunted by the refusal of his nation to give him his due. Why? Why and again why? I can make a few guesses. His fourth wife, Shirley, accompanied him on a tour of Poland and Russia some time around 1970. When they returned, Shirley told me how he had been mobbed everywhere. A huge crowd greeted them at the Moscow airport. And, she said, wherever they went, they had the feeling that the CIA was shadowing them. The KGB could be taken for granted. But the CIA? Yes, why not? Did some paranoid spook wonder what was his magical connection to the Russian people? And is there somewhere in some CIA or FBI file a notation questioning his loyalty? That's all it takes, just one of those little zingers; and we have been made increasingly aware in recent times of the corruption of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover. And one can only imagine the file Hoover started on the young man who began the desegregation of nightclub entertainment in Washington. Somewhere there is a hidden factor. It's just too strange that Willis was turned down for the Medal of Freedom not once but twice.

His nation's ingratitude continued after his death. The Voice of America tried to claim that his broadcasts were their property. Leonard Garment took action, precisely on the grounds that Willis was never an employee of VOA, and proved that they did not. And so his personal papers, including books and photographs, are at North Texas University while his countless broadcasts are safely on deposit in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. A retired history professor and jazz lover named Terrence Ripmaster is writing a biography.

If his own country won't recognize Willis's monumental work, the Russians are doing so. Last summer, they began a Willis Conover Jazz Festival in Moscow. Its public relations director, a jazz-concert producer named Michael Grin, wrote to Terry Ripmaster:

"It was a really great festival during two summer days — 5 and 6 July — in one of the best concert halls, the Central House of Cinematographers. Every day more than a thousand jazz fans came there to pay a tribute to Willis Conover. In our jazz circles, he is a legend, as Coltrane or Ellington, because a lot of Russians began to listen jazz thanks to his *Jazz Hours*. The specially designed posters with the Willis Conover's foto was hanged all over the city. On July 5 in the first part played our jazz stars as Alexei Kozlov, Igor Bril, David Golschein y Alexander Oscichuk with their groups, in the second part played the Michael Brecker Quartet (Joey Calderazzo, Chris Minh Doky, and Jeff Watts).

"The second evening played the American students and professors of the Georgia State University (GSU Jazztet) and Russian young musicians and in the second part Michael Brecker played solo, then he played in duo with Joey Calderazzo and the culmination of the concert was when Brecker invited two our young musicians from the Alexander Oscichuk group to play with him. (Sergei Vasilyev, bass, Pavel Timofeev, drums).

"These concerts were very successful and had a good press. Three months later one of our central TV channels transmitted a one-hour version of this festival."

And I'll just bet it was a lot better than the PBS broadcast of that clumsy Bill Clinton "jazz party" at the White House.

Willis was cremated and his ashes buried in Arlington National Cemetery, not for the honor and service his life's work had done for his country, for music, and for the world, but because he once served in the army.