

Title: Willis of Oz: How Willis Conover Enchanted the Thaw Generation of Poets with His “Jazz Hour” Radio Program

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With the advent of his Voice of America “Jazz Hour” radio show, Willis Conover began transmitting an alluring aural vision of life and artistry to the Thaw generation of Soviet Russians. While Conover’s influence is widely acknowledged, there has been little study of why and how his show’s impact was so strongly felt, or how its rhythms echoed in the work of Thaw generation poets. Joseph Brodsky’s 1960 “Piece with Two Pauses for Voice and Baritone Sax” captures the mood as it was then best—the static void of Soviet surroundings giving way to a dynamic alternative universe that issued from a radio receiver box (I build here on the work of Elena Petrushanskaia). Evgeny Rein and Anatoly Naiman were still feeling the impact years later, as their retrospective poems about jazz show. So how was it done? Conover carefully constructed a show that effectively conveyed, along with jazz music itself, a spirit of independence built on intimacy, artistry, and collective fun. Using representative quotes and excerpts from Conover’s archived programs and from Conover himself, I will demonstrate in this talk how Conover’s Jazz Hour conveyed an attractive and powerful message of human creativity and dignity.

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