

Interviews with Jazz musicians for the Voice of America--Willis Conover (1956)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Maristella Feustle (guest post)*



Willis Conover

Through the use of jazz in public diplomacy, the Voice of America became an unexpected and largely unsung hero in documenting jazz history through the programs of Willis Conover (1920-1996). The “jazz hour” of Conover’s “Music USA” program (1955-1996) was not the VOA’s first foray into broadcasting jazz; Leonard Feather’s “Jazz Club USA” was a notable forerunner in the early 1950s. Program schedules in the US National Archives indicate the existence of other VOA jazz broadcasts in the late 1940s, and Conover himself was involved in at least one at that early date, preserved on an August 1949 transcription disc of a program called “American Jazz.”

Conover’s “Music USA” was, however, by far the most successful VOA jazz offering in terms of geographical reach, impact, and longevity, as he continued to host the program from early 1955 until shortly before his death in 1996. The success of the program was due in part to the geopolitical timing of its inception after the death of Stalin and during a renaissance of interest in jazz in the Soviet Union and countries in its sphere of influence. Still, its success was primarily due to Conover’s own background, his programming philosophy, and the personal network he had built with jazz performers in his decade as a Washington, DC-area broadcaster after the Second World War.

Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1920, Willis Clark Conover, Jr. was the eldest son of an US Army officer whose work required the family to relocate frequently. Conover later recounted that he had attended 25 different schools before graduating high school, on the US mainland and in Puerto Rico. His personal archives at the University of North Texas Music Library in Denton, Texas, show an early aptitude for writing and a love of science fiction; by the mid-1930s, teenaged Conover was corresponding with H.P. Lovecraft and other luminaries of the horror/sci-fi/fantasy genre. Conover’s early exposure to music came in part through singing in choirs, mentored by an aunt, Mary Louise Conover, who had had a successful career on local radio in

Buffalo; he also took an early interest in theater, and first thought of being a radio announcer when he played that role in a high school play.

Conover studied for a year at Salisbury State Teachers College in Maryland, and worked at the campus station at the time, WSAL, but his college career ended when he won a radio announcing contest and a position at WTBO in Cumberland, Maryland, where he quickly became chief announcer, worked alongside future television pioneer Peg Lynch, and where he discovered jazz.

Drafted in September 1942, Conover's experience interviewing on radio secured him a position at Ft. Meade in Maryland interviewing recruits for military job placement. His time in the Army brought him to the Stage Door Canteen in Washington, DC, where he caught the attention of a radio employee's wife by selecting a superior assortment of music for a party that needed a dose of musical energy. From there, he worked part-time at WWDC as his military obligations allowed until his honorable discharge from the army in February 1946.

By April, Conover was interviewing such top names as Duke Ellington, beginning an enduring friendship with Ellington that lasted for decades. Other major names in jazz followed as Conover also began work as a concert promoter, helping to integrate the DC club scene by insisting that clubs not turn patrons away on the basis of race. Conover interviewed and interacted with the Ellington band, Billie Holiday, Art Tatum, Stan Kenton, Lionel Hampton, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Kai Winding, among others.

The early VOA interviews that form the core of this entry in the National Recording Registry are thus best understood in the context of Conover's own connections: Conover was relying on his own devices to bring star power to the VOA's broadcasts. In the tenuous early days of the program, when he was not even the first choice for the job, and only a few dozen programs had been ordered, it is reasonable to suppose that Conover was leveraging everything he had to distinguish his program from others.

The 2010 induction of the Conover interviews into the Registry focuses on a core set based on the collection at the Library of Congress, most of which are dated from 1956. Since 2010, more information and more recordings have become available. The broadcast schedules in the collection at the University of North Texas have supplied more accurate dates; many of those interviews actually occurred in 1955, but the items in the Library of Congress had been labeled according to their duplication date at the time the copies were produced. In addition, the oldest recordings in Conover's personal collection at UNT, digitized in 2015 under a grant from the Grammy Foundation, have expanded the set of known recordings. The known set of interviews conducted through 1956 now stands according to a table at the end of this document.

By the spring of 1956, Conover's program was broadcast worldwide, and not only to nations behind the Iron Curtain. The pace of interviews produced for the program slowed after the summer of 1956, but occasional interviews continued for the duration of Conover's career. Collectively and individually, the early interviews on "Music USA" are a treasury of primary source material, and a snapshot of jazz at a particular time and place in its history. While the Cold War, the conflict which led to Conover's VOA program, ended with the dissolution of the

Soviet Union almost three decades ago, these interviews are of enduring cultural and historical value.

Maristella Feustle is the Music Special Collections Librarian at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, and serves as the Music Library Association's alternate member on the National Recording Preservation Board.

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

Table of Known Willis Conover Interviews for the Voice of America, 1955-1956

Program	Date recorded	Broadcast date	Interview	Copies present	Available online
131-B	4/15/1955	5/11/1955 (tentative)	Kai Winding	UNT	yes (UNT)
172-B	5/18/1955		Art Tatum	UNT	yes (UNT)
181-B	5/25/1955		Billy Taylor	UNT	yes (UNT)
191-B	6/1/1955		Marian McPartland	UNT	yes (UNT)
219-B	6/22/1955	8/5/1955	George Shearing	UNT	yes (UNT)
226-B	6/28/1955	8/12/1955	Louis Armstrong, Barney Bigard, Bobby Hackett, Woody Herman	UNT	yes (UNT)
230-B	6/29/1955	8/16/1955	Chet Baker	UNT	yes (UNT)
251-B	7/20/1955	9/6/1955	Eartha Kitt	UNT, LC	yes (UNT)
282-A	8/24/1955	10/7/1955	Donald Mills (Mills Bros.)		
295-B	9/14/1955	10/20/1955	John Lewis, Sarah Vaughan	UNT	yes (UNT)
300-B	9/20/1955	10/25/1955	Duke Ellington	UNT	yes (UNT)
302-B	9/21/1955	10/27/1955	Don Elliott, Charlie Ventura		
310-B	9/28/1955	11/4/1955	Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa	UNT	yes (UNT)
314-B	9/28/1955	11/8/1955	Tito Puente		
316-B	9/29/1955	11/10/1955	Helen Merrill		
321-B	9/30/1955	11/15/1955	Gil Melle		
322-B	10/4/1955	11/16/1955	Zoot Sims		
323-B	10/4/1955	11/17/1955	Bob Brookmeyer		
328-B	10/5/1955	11/22/1955	Gerry Mulligan		
335-B	10/12/1955	11/29/1955	Carmen McRae; Dick Healey & Bryce Rohde (Australian Jazz Quartet)		

345-B	10/25/1955	12/9/1955	Peggy Lee	UNT, LC	yes (UNT)
349-B	10/26/1955	12/13/1955	Johnny Smith		
355-B	11/2/1955	12/19/1955	Jean "Toots" Thielemans		
356-B	11/2/1955	12/20/1955	George Shearing		
357-B	11/10/1955	12/21/1955	Dave Brubeck	UNT	yes (UNT)
358-B	11/16/1955	12/22/1955	Dizzy Gillespie	LC	no
364-A	11/25/1955	12/28/1955	Bill Finegan		
364-B	11/29/1955	12/28/1955	Louis Armstrong	Rutgers IJS	no
365-B	11/29/1955	12/29/1955	George Avakian	UNT	yes (UNT)
366-B	11/29/1955	12/30/1955	Art Tatum		
372-B	12/1/1955	1/5/1956	Orrin Keepnews		
373-B	12/7/1955	1/6/1956	Stan Kenton	LC	no
376-B	12/6/1955	1/9/1956	Clifford Brown		
377-B or 378-B	12/7/1955	1/10 or 1/11/1956	Max Roach		
384-B	12/14/1955	1/17/1956	Bernard Peiffer		
392-B	12/1/1955	1/25/1956	Milt Gabler	UNT	yes (UNT)
394-B	12/21/1955	1/27/1956	Benny Goodman	LC	no
399-B	1/3/1956	2/1/1956	Steve Allen, Bob Thiele (Thiele interviewed 12/2/1955)		
401-B	1/3/1956	2/3/1956	Benny Goodman (tentative program id.)	UNT?, LC	yes (UNT)
408-B	1/11/1956	2/10/1956	J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding		
420-B	1/24/1956	2/22/1956	Billy Eckstine (per schedule sheet)	UNT	yes (UNT)
421-B	1/24/1956	2/23/1956	Teddi King (per schedule sheet)	UNT	yes (UNT)
422-A	1/24/1956	2/24/1956	Mel Torme		
429-B	1/31/1956	3/2/1956	Eddie Condon (interviewed 1/27/1956)	UNT	yes (UNT)
432-B	2/1/1956	3/5/1956	Tony Scott		

434-B	2/7/1956	3/7/1956	Bob Shad (per schedule sheet)	UNT	yes (UNT)
439-B	2/8/1956	3/12/1956	Gene Krupa	LC	no
447-B	2/21/1956	3/20/1956	Billie Holiday (interviewed 2/15/1956)	LC	no
453-B	2/22/1956	3/26/1956	Horace Silver		
455-B	2/29/1956	3/28/1956	Rev. Alvin Kershaw		
467-B	3/8/1956	4/9/1956	Conte Candoli and Al Cohn		
471-B	3/14/1956	4/13/1956	George Wein (with Teddi King)		
499-B	4/11/1956	5/11/1956	Stan Getz	LC	no
504-B	4/18/1956	5/16/1956	Ella Fitzgerald	LC	no
506-B	4/18/1956	5/18/1956	Oscar Peterson	LC	no
520-B	5/1/1956	6/1/1956	Nat "King" Cole	UNT, LC	yes (UNT)
545-B	5/29/1956	6/26/1956	Congressman Frank Thompson		
551-B	6/7/1956	7/2/1956	Marshall Brown, John Laporta, Farmingdale HS students	UNT	yes (UNT)
560-B	6/14/1956	7/11/1956	Jimmy McPartland		
562-B	6/8/1956	7/13/1956	Nat Hentoff		
679-B	9/30/1956	11/7/1956	Marian McPartland		
695-B	11/21/1956	11/23/1956	Gerry Mulligan, Tony Scott, Quincy Jones, J.J. Johnson, Billy Taylor	UNT	yes (UNT)
701-B	10/30/1956	11/29/1956	Erroll Garner, per schedule sheet.		
713-B	11/14/1956	12/11/2015	Chico Hamilton		
714-B	11/14/1956	12/12/1956	Ray McKinley		
735-B	11/30/1956	1/2/1957	Neshui Ertegun		
742-B	12/12/1956	1/9/1957	Eugene Chermely		
no #	1956		W.C. Handy	UNT	yes (UNT)
no #	1/26/1956		Andy Wiswell	UNT	yes (UNT)

no #	5/1/1956		June Christy, Ted Heath, Bob Flanigan	UNT	yes (UNT)
1911-1914-B	7/13/1956		Louis Armstrong (5 hours)	UNT, LAHM	yes (UNT, LAHM)
no #	10/9/1955		Bud Powell	Rutgers IJS	no
572-B	6/26/1956	7/23/1956	George Shearing (tentative program id.)	LC	no

Note:

UNT = University of North Texas Music Library.

Rutgers IJS = Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University

LAHM = Louis Armstrong House Museum Archives, Queens College

LC = Library of Congress

See also:

Feustle, Maristella. "Willis Conover's Washington." *Current Research in Jazz* 8, (2016).

<https://www.crj-online.org/v8/CRJ-Conover.php>

Feustle, Maristella. "Liberated from Serfdom: Willis Conover and the Tallinn Jazz Festival of 1967". *Popular Music and Public Diplomacy: Transnational and Transdisciplinary Perspectives* ed. Mario Dunkel and Sina Nitzsche. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018.

Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program: Willis Conover, interviewed by Billy Taylor, August 1994.