



2015 Brock International
Prize in Education Nominee

John Ferguson

Nominated by Peter Markes

THE 2014 BROCK
INTERNATIONAL PRIZE
IN EDUCATION

*Nominated by
Peter Markes*

*John Ferguson
Nominee*



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STATEMENT OF NOMINATION

To the Brock Prize Jury:

When I first met John Ferguson, the stakes were high. He was responsible for finding the 2013 class of music groups for the U.S. Bureau of Education and Culture's 'American Music Abroad' program, and I was a member of one of the auditioning bands. The live auditions were in St. Louis, and though not a judge, John was on hand to answer any questions. As the executive director and founder of American Voices, John's work that day was to find the best, most positive representatives of art and culture that our country could send abroad.

To describe a skill set for such a task is daunting, at the least. John is a consummate musician, a world class pianist and music educator. He is a gifted administrator, not only accomplishing the tasks of organizing the AMA program, but also countless other arts education programs throughout the world. Indeed, the sun does not set on his work! Regarding his administration, he possesses the rare skill to surround himself with talented, hard-working people.

Above all, however, John Ferguson is a visionary. To choose a life of diplomacy through the arts is a calling. To experience incredible success with this vocation in some of our world's most conflict-ridden regions is his genius, the result of hours of hard work and constant attention to issues of politics, finance, personnel management, and a precocious cultural awareness and sensitivity. Within and above all, John stays focused on the innate, transcendent beauty of sharing one's art and culture.

The YES (Youth Excellence on Stage) Academies that John has founded through American Voices are difficult to imagine, but this nomination portfolio will make an attempt to create a picture. Seeking residencies in countries of recent or current conflict, YES Academies have operated in Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Syria, Thailand and Sudan. Watching these students interact with teaching artists from the U.S., the realization of a peaceful relationship through creating something new, innovative, and expressive saturates their communities. When the academies end, the programs are frequently sustained by local teachers who are taught by YES instructors. Even in America, this accomplishment is difficult to achieve, and yet it is happening in some of the most troubled headlining countries in the world. The idea is innovative, it is sustained throughout numerous diverse regions in the world, and it could certainly be replicated on an even larger scale. For these reasons and for his work with American Voices, founder John Ferguson is highly deserving of the Brock Prize.

Thank you to the Brock International Prize in Education administration for the opportunity and honor to pursue this high recognition for such a fine man.

With humble admiration,



Peter Markes
2014 Oklahoma Teacher of the Year
2012 American Music Abroad touring musician

ABOUT THE YES ACADEMY



YES Academy (Youth Excellence on Stage) is a program of American Voices, a nonprofit based in St. Louis, Missouri, with more than 20 years of experience in cultural engagement and education programs in over 125 nations ranging from Afghanistan and Iraq to Venezuela and Burma. The mission is to reach out to youth in nations emerging from conflict or isolation with professional level training in music, dance and theater with a focus on those genres unique to the American experience, Jazz, Broadway and Hip Hop as well as classical art forms such as string orchestra, piano, voice and ballet.

In addition, the YES Academies provide intensive teacher training and donate music scores, methods, instruments and dance and theater supplies to all our project partners. The faculty represents the United States' most outstanding educators from leading American universities, theaters, orchestras and hip hop crews. They not only lead student workshops in these countries, but also train teachers in each region so that the programs may continue in the absence of the American professor.



For more information about each YES Academy and to view photos, please visit: <http://yesacademy.info>



OTHER AMERICAN VOICES PROGRAMS

Jazz Bridges brings outstanding jazz musicians from the United States to play with local traditional, jazz and popular musicians in countries around the world. This program fuses different musical styles, instruments, and talents to create an innovative collaboration between musical cultures. Signature programs have taken place in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Albania to name only a few. From 2002 to 2006 American Voices founded and ran the Caspian Jazz and Blues Festival in Baku, Azerbaijan and the Almaty International Jazz Festival in Kazakhstan.

Broadway Abroad helps aspiring singers, actors and dancers the world over by offering musical theater education training that includes voice, acting, dance, staging, make-up, costuming and stage design. Participants learn selections from timeless American musicals such as *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Les Mis*, and *Lion King* to name only a few. This program has brought the first musical theater productions to nations such as Vietnam, Burma, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Moldova and Syria. In addition, a new generation of future musical theater performers has been trained in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Iraq and Lebanon. This program also includes training for children and young professionals.



Hiplomacy teaches positive self-expression, social cohesion, and community development through the quintessentially American art of Hip Hop. At *Hiplomacy* programs across the globe, students learn the fundamentals of Hip Hop and its history as well as technical classes on dance, vocals, graphics, poetry and spoken word, DJ-ing and MC-ing. The *Hiplomacy* program has brought the first live U.S. Hip Hop performers and trainers to nations such as Sudan, Azerbaijan, Vietnam and Tajikistan.

Youth Orchestras provide advanced musical training to instrumentalists, composers, conductors, arrangers, and educators, pushing them to the next levels of performance and teaching. Participants are drawn from music schools, universities, and conservatories in countries where American Voices work to learn new repertoire ranging from Baroque to popular and contemporary American music. In programs in Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, this program provides the *only* opportunity in these nations for youth to play in a large ensemble and learn the skills of cooperation, collaboration and team-building.

American Music Abroad – Administered on behalf of the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, this program tours American artists of any characteristically American musical genre across the globe. Annual tours are scheduled with a special focus on younger and underserved audiences in more than 50 countries with little or no access to live American musical performances. This program is the evolution of the *Jazz Ambassadors* program of the 1950s.



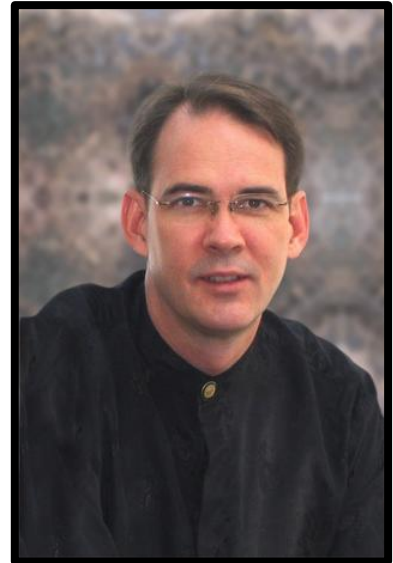
For more information about American Voices, please visit www.americanvoices.org

BIOGRAPHY

John Ferguson currently resides in Bangkok, Thailand where he carries out his dual roles as pianist and Executive Director of American Voices. His activities include serving as director of the YES Academy (Youth Excellence on Stage) program in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Sudan, Pakistan and Thailand. His innovative work in the field of cultural engagement was recently given a national award at the Summit for U.S. Citizen Diplomacy in November, 2010 where American Voices was named one of the 'Top Ten Best Practices Organizations' along with Sundance Institute and the Kennedy Center.

In 1992, John Ferguson founded American Voices to fulfill the need for authentic cultural engagement programs with the newly independent nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the focus of American Voices has expanded to include a focus on nations emerging from conflict or isolation in the Middle East, North Africa and Central, South and Southeast Asia.

In 2007, he founded the innovative summer youth performing program, YES Academy, in Iraq. The program has since expanded to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Thailand. The YES Academy programs have been featured on ABC Nightly News, PRI Radio *'The World'* and CNN in the United States and viewed by millions in local broadcasts in the YES Academy nations. In addition, John Ferguson founded the first international jazz festivals in Azerbaijan, The Caspian Jazz and Blues Festival (2002-2005), and Kazakhstan, Almaty International Jazz Festival (2003-2004).



As a speaker on cultural diplomacy and engagement, he has been a guest speaker at the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, the St. Louis Cultural Roundtable, New England Conservatory, Carnegie-Mellon University and the Universities of Texas at Austin and North Carolina. His opinion pieces have been published in The Christian Science Monitor and distributed internationally.

His performing activities include concerts, broadcasts and masterclasses throughout Europe, North and South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Having keen interest in engaging with nations emerging from conflict or isolation, he has performed from El Salvador, Belarus and Kosovo to Cambodia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Recent highlights include the performance of the Schumann Piano Quintet at the Afghan National Institute of Music in Kabul and recital appearances in Rome where the *Corriere Della Sere* described his performance of George Gershwin as '...one of the most intense moments of the evening...'

John Ferguson first studied music at the High School for the Performing Arts in his hometown of Houston, Texas and completed his studies at the University of Texas at Austin where he received his Master's Diploma. Additional studies took him to Paris where he was a student of Nadia Boulanger, Geneva where he studied with Maroussia le Marc'hadour and Carnegie-Mellon University where he received a License in Dalcroze Eurhythmics with Dr. Marta Sanchez.

CURRICULUM VITAE

John A. Ferguson
Executive Director
American Voices

E-mail: john.ferguson@americanvoices.org
<http://www.americanvoices.org>

EDUCATION

- 1989 CONSERVATOIRE DE TOULOUSE, France
Graduate studies with Thérèse Dussaut
- 1984 UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, Austin, Texas
Master of Music Degree, Piano Performance
- 1984 CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
License – Dalcroze Music Education Method
- 1980 AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF MUSICAL STUDIES, Graz, Austria
- 1981 UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, Austin, Texas
Bachelor of Music Degree, Summa cum Laude
- 1976-78 CONSERVATOIRE DE FONTAINEBLEAU
Summer courses with Nadia Boulanger

Piano studies with:

Eugene List, Danielle Martin, Lita Guerra, Edith Lateiner-Grosz, Barbara Lister-Sink, Thérèse Dussaut

Master Classes with:

Evgeny Malignin, Gaby Casadesus

LANGUAGES

Fluent: English, French, German, Dutch

Working Knowledge: Thai

Familiarity: Russian, Arabic

EXPERIENCE**February 1992 to present:**

Founder and Executive Director, AMERICAN VOICES, a not-for-profit organization founded for the promotion of mutual understanding between the United States and nations and cultures in the Middle East, Central, South and Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. The emphasis of our programming is to provide access to the American performing arts and training in countries emerging from isolation or conflict. Responsibilities include:

- Fundraising/Grant-writing activities with European and U.S. government agencies, individuals and families, the U.S. and international business community and foundations
- Development of lectures, seminars, conferences and summer academy programs for American culture and performing arts. Most recently the Unity Performing Arts Academy in Erbil, Iraq (July 13 to 23, 2007)
- Organization, artistic programming and fund-raising for annual jazz festivals in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (2002 to 2005)
- Extensive work with the media through the press, radio and television in over ninety countries. Use of new technologies such as internet and Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube, Facebook, etc. to create international support for our mission
- International outreach and development of a network of contacts ranging from musical and educational institutions, humanitarian organizations, artists and concert agencies in over two dozen countries
- Creation of community-based artist-in-residence programs such as American Voices' 'Hiplomacy', Jazz Bridges and 'Variations on America' programs.
- Organization of concert tours and special projects worldwide
- Coordination of volunteers and office management

- 1990- 1995** Laureate of the Yehudi Menuhin Foundation, Paris
Performed in festivals (Reims, Paris) and Artist-in-Residence Programs throughout France
- 1989-1991** Free-lance concert pianist based in Paris. Performed mainly in Western Europe and the United States
- 1986-1988** Adjunct Music Faculty, University of North Carolina at Asheville. Applied piano
- 1984-1988** Artist-in-Residence in the North Carolina Visiting Artist Program in Asheville and Waynesville, North Carolina. Responsibilities included:
- Performance of 250 concerts per year, organization of festivals, exhibitions and school events
 - Intense community organizing within and outside of the traditional arts community
 - Close contact with the local media, press and community arts networks
 - Cooperation with local, state and federal government agencies and programs
- 1983-1984** Teaching Assistant, University of Texas at Austin

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

- 1983** William Doty Special Achievement Award, University of Texas
Gramma Fisher Award, American Institute of Musical Studies, Graz, Austria
- 1981-1983** Rotary Foundation Graduate Fellowship for International Study. Geneva, Switzerland

OTHER SKILLS

Excellent knowledge of institutions of higher education, cultural life and current issues in Western and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Middle East, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

Project and Festival development and organization

Excellent understanding of University music school curricula around the world

Experience in global cultural diplomacy – bringing a cultural message of the United States to global audiences

Extensive experience in cross cultural cooperation and understanding, including extensive experience in closed societies, censored environments, corrupt, inefficient and mismanaged government and cultural agencies and other challenging situations

Extensive experience in sponsorship and fund-raising from US and international business communities in over thirty countries worldwide

Experience in not-for-profit management sector

FESTIVAL ORGANIZATION

Unity Performing Arts Academy in Erbil, Iraq - 2007 to present
Iraq Caspian Jazz and Blues, Baku Azerbaijan - 2002, 2003, 2004
Kazakhstan International Jazz Festival - 2002, 2003, 2004

SUMMER PROGRAMS

Taiwan Summer Jazz Academy 2004 / 2005 / 2006 / 2008, Taipei

PARTNER INSTITUTIONS AND ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMS**WESTERN EUROPE**

Maison Des Conservatoires, Paris
 Mediterranean University, Malta
 Hochschule für Musik, Leipzig
 Nakas Conservatory, Athens, Greece

Germany - Music Schools of Goerlitz, Zwickau, Plauen, Chemitz, Schwerin, Wernigerode, Hoyerswerda, Stendal, Erfurt, Gotha, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Landkreis Kaiserslautern, Pirmasens, Merzig

EASTERN EUROPE and FORMER USSR

Franz Liszt Academy, Budapest
 Kodaly Institute and Bela Bartok Academy, Hungary
 Conservatory of Music, Prague
 Academy of Music, Baku, Azerbaijan
 Gliere and Lysenko Academy, Kiev
 Academy of Music, Minsk, Belarus
 Academy of Music, Chisinau, Moldova
 Academy of Music, Tallinn, Estonia
 Music Academy, Riga, Latvia
 Music Academy, Vilnius, Lithuania
 National Conservatory of Music, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
 National Conservatory of Music, Almaty and Astana, Kazakhstan
 National Conservatory of Music, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
 National Conservatory of Music, Yerevan, Armenia
 National Conservatory of Music, Tblisi, Georgia
 Academy of Music, Baku, Azerbaijan
 Academy of Music, Wroclaw
 Music Lyceum, Lodz
 National Conservatory - Ashgabad, Turkmenistan
 National Music Academy – Bratislava, Slovakia
 University of Pristina, Pristina, Kosovo
 Academy of Arts, Tirana, Albania
 Conservatory of Music, Sarajevo, Bosnia
 Pavarotti Music School, Mostar, Bosnia
 Academy of Music, Zagreb, Croatia
 National University, Skopje, Macedonia
 Pavarotti Music School, Mostar, Bosnia
 National Conservatory, Sofia, Bulgaria

LATIN AMERICA

National Opera of Teresa Carreno Theatre, Caracas, Venezuela
 National Conservatory of La Paz, Bolivia
 Central American Technical University, Tegucigalpa, Honduras
 University of Panama, Panama
 National University, San Salvador, El Salvador
 Managua University, Nicaragua

MIDDLE EAST

National Conservatory, Beirut, Lebanon
Higher Institute of Music, Kuwait
Institute of Music, Bahrain
Higher Institute of Music, Damascus, Syria
Higher Institute of Music, Amman, Jordan
Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra Institute, Muscat, Oman
Algiers Conservatory, Algeria
Conservatory of Sousse, Tunisia
Qatar Academy, Doha, Qatar

ASIA

Bangkok Opera
Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh
Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh and Hue Conservatories, Vietnam
Art Music Academy, Rangoon, Burma
Payap, Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, Katesaert Universities, Thailand
National School of Dance and Music, Vientiane, Laos
Technical University, National Arts Academy, International College of Music, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
National University of the Arts, Taipei
Sun Yat Sen University, Kaoshiung, Taiwan
Shih Chien University, Taipei, Taiwan
Calcutta School of Music, India

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Monday, August 25, 2014

Dear Brock Prize Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend John Ferguson and American Voices for the Brock Prize. John has been presenting effective cultural engagement and educational programming in over 120 countries since 1994 and sharing American music and arts with thousands of audiences worldwide.

The Mission of American Voices is *'to provide cultural exchange through the performing arts and education in nations emerging from conflict and isolation'* which John has personified since the beginning.

I've worked with John since 2007 when we started the first performing arts summer academy in northern Iraq including over 300 students in music and dance from all over the country. We were the first Americans many of them had met in person and we were able to counteract much of the negative propaganda they were hearing at the time.

Since then we've developed similar programs in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sudan. In each instance the interaction with the students and families has been very meaningful.

We've also managed the American Music Abroad program for the US Dept. of State since 2011 and had the pleasure of coordinating educational and performance tours with many US musicians such as Kyle Dillingham and Peter Markes. These tours visit close to 50 developing countries each year and introduce thousands of people to American music and these fine musicians.

I can't think of a more deserving individual or organization for your recognition. The majority of our work takes place outside of the USA and often goes unnoticed back here at home. We very much appreciate Peter Markes' nomination as well as your consideration. I'd be very happy to answer any questions you may have, cell-305-205-4500, marc.thayer@americanvoices.org

Sincerely,



Marc Thayer
Deputy Director
American Voices



United States Department of State
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Washington, DC 20522
www.state.gov

August 28, 2014

Selection Committee
Brock International Prize in Education

To the Members of the Selection Committee:

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has worked closely with John Ferguson and his organization, the Association of American Voices, in administering the American Music Abroad (AMA) program. Since 2012, AMA has sent approximately 10 American roots music groups in genres such as urban/hip-hop, gospel, bluegrass, and jazz to more than 40 countries per year to conduct public concerts, interactive performances with local musicians, lecture demonstrations, workshops, and jam sessions with diverse audiences.

We consistently receive positive feedback from our Embassies overseas, from our traveling musicians, and from audience members about John and American Voices. For example, after hosting a bluegrass band, an Embassy staff member said that "the success of the tour can be attributed to support provided by John Ferguson and the American Voices staff." A musician who toured on the AMA program said that "American Voices and John Ferguson were exceptional at allowing our experience to envelop both a wide range of traditional cultural experience and international music education."

Music has long served as an avenue for cross-cultural communication, eliminating obstacles like language and uniting diverse populations through a common art form. Cultural diplomacy opens dialogue and engages new audiences through shared experiences, and connects with young people and underserved audiences. American Voices has helped us achieve these goals around the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shannon Dorsey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Shannon Dorsey
Cultural Programs Division

PRESS

The Christian Science Monitor **WORLD PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE** **Difference Maker**

By Tibor Krausz, Correspondent
JUNE 7, 2013

John Ferguson spreads goodwill for America through the power of music

Pianist John Ferguson founded American Voices, a nonprofit whose mission is to help aspiring young artists around the world pursue their interest in American jazz, Broadway, break dancing, and classical music.



Photo by Tibor Krausz

John Ferguson (c.) poses with a class at the YES Academy in Bangkok, Thailand, during a week-long workshop in American musical genres.

BANGKOK, THAILAND — Amjad Dabi had a simple wish: to keep polishing his technique on his favorite piano compositions by the French Impressionist masters Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. But in the midst of a brutal civil war in his native Syria, his artistic pursuits became more futile and perilous by the day.

Last September, the young pianist was injured by a car bomb that exploded outside a school for music near his home in a residential area of Damascus, Syria; a dozen civilians were killed. A few

days later another car bomb blew out the windows of the conservatory where he had been studying.

“We’d be playing music and hear explosions going off nearby,” says Mr. Dabi, who looks uncannily like US composer George Gershwin and whose face bears scars from the first bomb blast. “It felt like living a nightmare that was never going to end.”

But for Dabi and another young Syrian musician, violinist Andrey Mukaddasi, who founded an interfaith string orchestra in Damascus, the nightmare did end. Soon both were on a flight to Bangkok, Thailand; from there they eventually would head to the United States to continue their studies.

“I figured we should get them out of there before they came to serious harm,” says John Ferguson, a classical pianist from Houston who helped the young Syrians leave their war-torn country by arranging scholarships for them at music colleges in Texas.

Mr. Ferguson is the founder of American Voices, a US nonprofit whose mission is to spread goodwill across developing nations by helping aspiring young musicians indulge in their passion for the all-American art forms of jazz, Broadway musicals, and break dancing, as well as classical music.

Over the past two decades he has worked in some 120 countries from Nigeria to Myanmar (Burma).

At his Youth Excellence on Stage (YES) Academies, held in countries from Afghanistan to Thailand, hundreds of up-and-coming talents practice playing orchestral compositions, such as Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” or stage music from Broadway classics, such as “Company,” under the guidance of American teachers. The programs culminate in high-octane gala concerts performed by the participants – invariably to rapturous applause from local audiences.

In a similar vein, during his Camp Unity initiatives Ferguson brings together young artists from warring communities in sectarian strife-ridden nations such as Lebanon and Iraq to foster friendships through a shared love of music and dance.

That spirit of camaraderie was on full display at a YES Academy in Bangkok in early May for nearly 300 teenagers from across Thailand and the region. Playing side by side in a string quartet were Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian students from Yala, one of Thailand’s three restive southernmost provinces where an Islamist insurgency has claimed thousands of lives.

“We did have some instances of animosity at first,” concedes Ameen Mhamad, a teenage Muslim cellist from Yala. “But religious differences disappear when you have to work together to produce a piece of music.”

“We get along well,” attests Suprawee Chansawang, a Christian student who plays the violin in the interfaith orchestra.

Ferguson can chalk up another small victory for the transformative power of music.

“It happens all the time,” he says. “In Iraq we have seen real friendships develop between kids from Kurdistan and Baghdad at our YES Academies there.”

Ferguson also works with US embassies across the developing world to help stage jazz festivals, offer training (as well as musical scores and instruments, if needed) to struggling youth orchestras, and engage in “hipplomacy” by flying in American teachers to coach youngsters from Guatemala to Sudan in hip-hop and break dancing as a form of artistic self-expression.

He also directs the American Music Abroad concert series for the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which has just sent the Boston-based bluegrass band Della Mae on a tour of Central Asia, including Islamabad, Pakistan. Similar tours by US jazz quartets, folk bands, and gospel choirs are in the works for other poor nations.

“I became fascinated by John's mission,” notes James Latt, a retired school principal from Washington, D.C., who recently joined American Voices to help out with organizing. “We have so many moving parts,” he says.

A lanky, good-natured man, Ferguson operates out of a shipping-container-sized office tucked away at the end of a small cul-de-sac in central Bangkok. He's on the go relentlessly, living and working *allegro*.

One week he may be in Sudan preparing the ground for a YES Academy; the next he's back in Bangkok running a YES Academy there for the fifth time. One moment he's organizing a tour of US hip-hop dancers to Nigeria to help train local aficionados; the next he's firing off e-mails arranging the trip of a jazz band from New Orleans to a music festival in Venezuela.

In odd moments you'll find him sitting, head in hands, trying to catch a little shut-eye. “It's on the educational side where you can make a difference,” stresses the pianist, who gave up performing to dedicate himself to his ventures. “You create a big band in Azerbaijan, and it keeps going after you leave. You start a jazz festival in Almaty [Kazakhstan], and it becomes an annual event. That's how you leave a mark.”

That insight dawned on him in 1990, just as the Soviet Union was unraveling after the fall of the Berlin Wall. While living in Paris and playing in a classical crossover ensemble with two other Texas musicians, he was invited to perform at an arts festival organized by the Latvian Independence Movement in Riga, Latvia, during the heady days of the “Singing Revolution” in the Baltic Soviet satellite states.

“We had this experience of being treated like rock stars just by virtue of being Americans,” Ferguson recalls. “I realized what a potent and popular brand America was.”

As the front lines of political turmoil moved elsewhere, Ferguson followed – first to the warring states of the former Yugoslavia, then farther afield to Central Asia and the Far East. After the Sept. 11 terror attacks in 2001, he shifted his focus to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Along the way, he has had to tangle with obtuse bureaucrats. “The longer you work in a country, the more some corrupt officials [come to you for kickbacks and other benefits],” he observes wryly. He’s also had to try and work his way around certain cultural taboos. In more conservative Muslim societies, in which dancing and singing – especially by young women – are frowned upon, for example, “We may have to teach [students] surreptitiously,” he says.

In 2005, after the ultraconservative Taliban movement in Afghanistan had been ousted from power by US forces, Ferguson flew into Kabul with a group of American jazz musicians. Their mission: to jam with a traditional Afghan quintet whose members had just dug up their instruments from where they had buried them for fear of Islamist purists.

“We rolled off the plane and had a blast,” he recalls. “Our aim was to connect culturally.”

That remains his *modus operandi*. “We target countries that are emerging from war and isolation,” he says. “You start from scratch and then build.”

Both of his Syrian protégés share his sentiments about the unifying power of music. “American Voices has done everything for us,” says Dabi, who plans to return to Syria when it is safe to help train a new generation of musicians. “In the Middle East we need musicians and artists far more than we need engineers,” he insists. “We need a new Renaissance.”

“Music has the power to unite people,” Mr. Mukaddasi agrees. “It transcends politics, race, culture, and religion. It helps people connect without saying a word as they share their hopes, passions, and sorrows.”

McClatchy Washington Bureau

These U.S. ‘diplomats’ wield fiddles and dance moves, not briefcases

BY MARIA RECIO
August 1, 2014

WASHINGTON — East Carolina University’s Greg Hurley is going abroad again for a two-week trip this month, but not exactly for a classic vacation.

It will be Beirut for the viola and violin teacher, who’s left Greenville, N.C., every summer for the last five years and gone to places “emerging from conflict” as part of a program for students in formerly war-torn areas. A kind of summer camp, it teaches students who already have some musical training, and they rehearse and form an orchestra for a concert at the end of the visit.



Every year, the State Department and nonprofit groups help send musical troupes, dance groups and teachers abroad to promote American culture and generate goodwill.

It’s all part of cultural diplomacy, an idea that got its start with the “jazz ambassadors” at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. To buff its image, the U.S. sent jazz greats Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong and others overseas to showcase the unique American art form.

The programs and cultural exchanges have exploded since then, with the latest rage being hip-hop, an in-demand art form but one that has also drawn criticism of “hip-hop diplomacy.”

For Hurley, an associate professor of music who’s on the board of American Voices, the St. Louis-based group that’s sponsoring the trips with State Department support, the experiences he’s had in Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Thailand have been life-altering for him and, he thinks, for his students.

“It’s opened my eyes to other places,” he said in an interview.

While the teaching is slower because of the language barrier _ done through hand gestures and the international language of music _ it all comes together for the big final concert.

“It’s always great,” Hurley said. “You’ve worked so hard to pull it off in two weeks’ time. The parents are proud. The kids are proud.”

The Beirut program has 100 students, including several from Syria and Iraq.

“I think it brings goodwill towards us, and goodwill happens person by person,” said Hurley.

The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs pays for these kinds of programs and exchanges out of its budget, which is \$568 million this year. It's very clear about their mission.

"The primary goal of all our cultural exchanges is to build cross-cultural understanding," said Susan Pittman, the bureau's spokeswoman. "With more than half of the world's population under age 30, it's especially important for us to provide avenues for connecting with youth."

The approach is part of what's known as "soft diplomacy," the use of the arts and other forms of social interaction _ from agricultural programs to public construction _ as an instrument of foreign policy that contrasts with the "hard diplomacy" of the military and the economy. It's largely been an easy sell to performers and teachers.

Oklahoma City musician Kyle Dillingham plays a mean fiddle and with his band, Horseshoe Road, has always liked introducing foreign audiences to Western swing, folk music, bluegrass and jazz. His band recently completed a 16-day tour in Liberia, in West Africa, as part of the State Department's Arts Envoy program. It performed for the country's president, as well as to a rural audience where there was no electricity.



"At the heart of what we do is sharing our music with these people and giving these people a taste of American culture through our performances," said Dillingham, who also holds student workshops.

"I am an eclectic blend of traditional American music, which I think is an important aspect of musical diplomacy," he said. "I've developed a career as a music ambassador."

In a State Department-sponsored gig last year, Dillingham, 35, and his band toured Russia, Taiwan, South Korea and Burma for five weeks. They get their expenses paid plus a \$200 per day per person honorarium, a lot less than a concert tour, he noted. But he's happy to do it and creates his own riffs in unexpected ways.

In a performance with the Taipei Symphony Orchestra, Dillingham launched into "Orange Blossom Special," a bluegrass favorite that showcases the fiddle, but which drew the classical musicians in.

"Music does transcend languages and cultures and just about any barriers to traditional means of communication," he said.

That's been the experience of hip-hop artists, the most requested groups by foreign nations and U.S. embassies. At Philadelphia's Rennie Harris Puremovement, company manager Rodney Hill and a troupe of dancers were in Central Asia earlier this year and performed in Egypt, Israel and Palestinian territories in 2012. They also held master classes and gave lectures.

The surprise may be that hip-hop is now so entrenched due to social media that Hill found the students in the know, even able to distinguish differences in the genre, such as West Coast style, which has a more laid-back feel and harmony and uses bass.

"We did what we did; tell hip-hop through a story, and people gravitated to us," Hill said in an interview. "They knew it on YouTube and multimedia."

He said the style, which breaks all the rules of conventional dance, with floor lunges and jumps, "came out of the civil rights movement. We're not going with a message. We let them take it in; it's an exchange. We do, time and time again, enlighten people about the history of hip-hop dance."

One element that was the same in conservative religious places such as Egypt and Israel was a concern about having a woman and a man dancing together. "We didn't put them as close together," said Hill.

"Hip-hop breaks barriers," he said. "It breaks racism. It goes through every religion and every country."

Mark Katz, a music professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who's the director of its Institute for the Arts and Humanities, is leading a new two-year program for the government that's all about hip-hop.

"We see hip-hop as a global culture," said Katz, who's written a book, "Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ."

"At this point you go anywhere in the world and they have their own dialects of hip-hop."

The State Department awarded the school a \$1 million grant from its new Next Level program last year and Katz has taken hip-hop teams _ disc jockeys; rappers; beat makers, as producers are known; and dancers _ to India and Serbia and in September will go to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to Montenegro.

In India, Katz said, the students embraced everything about the experience, and in one exercise they used hip-hop to tape public service announcements for local media on such topics as the environment and violence against women.

"They meet Americans," he said. "They get a more nuanced view of what Americans are like. The idea is they will think positively of the U.S. It will be harder for these students to stereotype Americans."

The hip-hop effort has its critics.

“There’s no reason we should think hip-hop is some kind of effective communicator of the U.S.,” said Robert Albro, an expert on sociocultural anthropology at American University. “It’s not terribly central if you want to change perceptions in the world.”

Ill will toward the U.S. in some quarters of the world over its foreign policy can sometimes complicate the cultural mission.

Also, Dallas gospel singer Oscar Williams Jr. and his group, The Band of Life, were on a South American swing for the State Department earlier this year and found themselves in the middle of anti-government demonstrations in Venezuela. Their concerts were canceled, although Williams said they never felt in any danger.

The tour continued, as will others for Williams, who’ll travel to Chile next February to spread the musical word about gospel music on behalf of his country.

“Every time we go in, we are trying to share that it goes to the soul of America,” said Williams. “It’s something about the sound of the music, even if you’re not a believer. We firmly believe music is the universal language.”

Christian Science Monitor

Opinion Editorial

To build harmony, trumpet America's melody

We should use our musical traditions to show other nations our best side.

By John Ferguson OCTOBER 10, 2006

BANGKOK, THAILAND — On Sept. 12, 2001, American culture suddenly became a premium export product. The attack that was both a tragedy and an awakening for our nation propelled my small nonprofit organization, American Voices, into overdrive and onto the stages of Tashkent, Uzbekistan; Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Beirut, Lebanon. Our mission is to bring American musicians and culture to parts of the world emerging from isolation and conflict. Overnight, we transformed from a quaint endeavor in the cold war's aftermath to an essential tool in communicating who we are as a people and as a nation.

I moved to Europe in 1989 to pursue my career as a concert pianist. Immediately, I was drawn into an exciting cultural dialogue with the newly open societies of Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

American Voices worked closely with the United States Information Agency (USIA) to provide performances and expertise. We also donated music scores and educational materials of American genres such as musical theater, country, ragtime, jazz, blues, and opera.

The intense dialogue of the early 1990s gradually slowed to a halt as Congress put an end to the USIA in 1999 with the rationale that we had “won the cold war.” The short-sightedness of this decision became glaringly apparent as we woke to new realities and responsibilities in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks.

As one of the few US arts organizations with extensive experience in the Middle East and Central Asia, American Voices was able to respond nimbly to the new challenges of communicating American culture and values abroad. Within months of the disaster, we were organizing jazz festivals, Broadway shows, and opera performances with Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Lebanese, and Omanis.

The culmination of these efforts was our Jazz Bridges Afghanistan project last October – the first concert of American music for an Afghan audience in more than 25 years. It was a heartwarming week in which we brought a quartet of jazz musicians together with five traditional Afghan musicians and an Afghan pop trio. Our concerts had the Afghan audience dancing in the aisles, and these joyous images were broadcast nationwide by radio and TV. This project will start to reach a wider audience in the West through our upcoming concerts in February 2007 at the festival of Muslim cultures in London.

After an initial surge of support from Congress and the White House in 2002, funding for cultural diplomacy has again run out of steam. However, the need to communicate our vision and values as a nation has never been more urgent. Given the huge audiences American cultural programs draw, the glee local media take in broadcasting our interactive performances, and the tiny fraction of the

federal government's budget that these programs cost, exporting our culture is cost-effective over the long term in promoting mutual understanding and, therefore, security.

Our culture is powerful. The musical art forms that America built grew from the intermingling of our myriad ethnic and folk traditions. They are among the best ways we have to communicate the best of what we are as a nation to the rest of the world.

It might be a stretch, but try for a moment to imagine the hope and inspiration a Broadway show, blues festival, break-dancing workshop, or concert can bring to an entire nation emerging from isolation or conflict.

A frequent comment from Afghans who saw the performance in Kabul was, "Your concert makes us feel normal again." If you factor in local musicians performing these genres together with a handful of American soloists or, better yet, fusing their traditional music with ours, it becomes especially powerful.

There is still a deep well of appreciation for our culture and ideals. It would be wise public policy to nurture this appreciation. Through artistic dialogue, we can lead one another out of the gathering darkness of mutual distrust. The possibilities for this type of exchange are endless, and Americans, more than any others, have the means and the imperative to continue the communication.

- *John Ferguson is executive director of American Voices, a nonprofit organization based in Houston that brings American cultural diplomacy to more than 80 countries worldwide.*

Jazz Times: America's Jazz Magazine

OCTOBER 2007

Solo

By David R. Adler

Jazzing Iraq

Guest Column

Hard to believe, but Iraq was once seen as “an island in a sea of instability.” In *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, Penny M. Von Eschen discusses how Iraq changed, and how American jazz musicians practically witnessed it. Dave Brubeck played Baghdad in 1958, just weeks before Abd al-Karim Qassim deposed King Faysal II. In 1963, mere months after Duke Ellington came through town, Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, the mentor of Saddam Hussein, toppled Qassim's government. The rest is history, one might say. But the tale of American and Iraqi cultural exchange continues, under vastly different circumstances.

This summer, in the northern city of Erbil, the Houston-based non-profit American Voices launched the Unity Performing Arts Academy in Iraq. Its inaugural run began on July 14, oddly, the 49th anniversary of Qassim's coup. With support from the U.S. Embassy and the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, the academy flew in American and European faculty to provide 10 days of free instruction in jazz and classical music, dance (including ballet and hip-hop) and theater. The program attracted over 300 students: Arabs from Baghdad as well as Kurds from Erbil, Suleimaniya and other districts in what is known as Iraqi Kurdistan.

One goal was “to provide an oasis of calm” in a war-torn region, although Iraqi Kurdistan is comparatively calm as it is. In the words of a Kurdistan Regional Government branding campaign, this is “The Other Iraq,” free of the carnage and lawlessness plaguing the other provinces. And yet it is no paradise. The area has seen violent anti-corruption protests, acute fuel shortages, border tensions with Turkey and Iran, even the occasional car bomb. Look south, however, and it's clear that things could be worse. To a remarkable degree, Kurdistan has recovered from Saddam's genocidal Anfal campaign of the late '80s. But while most Kurds welcomed their tormenter's downfall, their hard-won gains may wind up threatened by the current war and its aftermath.

No one expects music instruction to resolve the crisis. But in these situations, nourishing the arts and culture is hardly unimportant. If American Voices has fostered a bit of amity between Iraqis and Westerners, Arabs and Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis, Muslims and Christians, it has accomplished much.

Since its inception in 1993, American Voices has offered programming throughout Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central and Southeast Asia. “We try to introduce American culture to parts of the world isolated by ideology, geography or conflict,” says executive director John Ferguson, a classical pianist.

While jazz makes up roughly 25 percent of a typical program, it can

spark some of the most substantive interactions. “People who have close contact with traditional music take to jazz very easily,” Ferguson notes. “That's been our experience in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and western China. The Kurds, too, come from a folk tradition that is improvised and very spontaneous.”

There were two jazz instructors in Erbil. Dr. Gene Aitken, recently inducted into *DownBeat's* Jazz Education Hall of Fame, taught for over a quarter-century in Colorado and is now based in Singapore and Bangkok. Germany's Werner Englert has run American Voices clinics for the last five years in Taiwan, Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. The two had never worked together before. They landed in Iraq with donated instruments, several complete sets of Jamey Aebersold Play-A-Longs and a readiness to improvise not just the music, but the pedagogy as well.

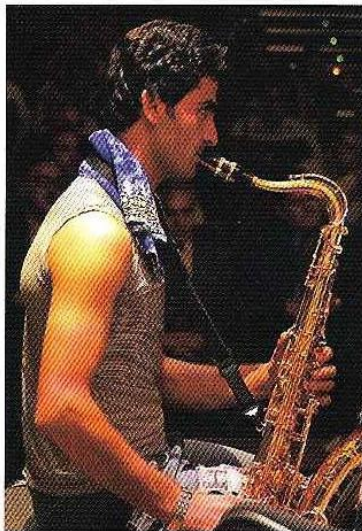
“It was absolutely the experience of a lifetime,” Aitken exclaims. There were roughly 50 jazz students, ranging from 15 to 50 years of age. “They had barely any previous exposure to jazz,” Aitken says, “but they had quite a thirst for information, and the progress from day one to the end was tremendous. I've never encountered anything as meaningful.” One class was a big band with percussion, guitars, woodwinds and even a lute-like *saz*. Aitken adds, “We were able to take standard arrangements and make them work pretty well.” In a brief ABC News clip about the academy, one could hear the group riffing on “Cantaloupe Island.”

After the long days of classes and workshops, there was a gala performance by a “Unity Orchestra” that combined personnel from different cities around the region. This had never happened before in Iraq. Audio problems didn't diminish the event's significance. “At the end,” recalls Englert, “there was a lot of celebration and tears, deep emotions on all sides.”

American Voices left the students with plenty of Aebersolds and other materials, hoping to encourage further study. “There is talk of forming a jazz NGO [non-governmental organization] in Suleimaniya to continue the work there,” Ferguson says, “and we will keep working toward follow-up visits in Erbil.”

Much like the Cold War jazz tours, the American Voices initiative is open to all manner of political interpretation. The White House, eager to promote “good news” out of Iraq, may spin it as a vindication of current policy. Others may dismiss “cultural diplomacy” as part of the apparatus of occupation. Islamist militias, who view all music as a sin, hardly need to be polled on their view of American jazz and dance. Caught in the middle are everyday Iraqis, trying to better their lives. American Voices is standing by them. As jazz enthusiasts and fellow citizens, we owe this organization thanks. **JT**

The opinions expressed in this column are the author's, not those of anyone associated with American Voices.



VIDEO

YES Academy Highlight

A short introduction to American Voices YES Academy Program, 1 minute

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JjXdvBek1c>

Voice of America reports on American Voices YES Academy Thailand 2012 program in Bangkok.

In the report, VOA focuses on American Voices cultural diplomacy work around the globe, 2 min 33 sec

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9t25fwhFtk>

Youtube playlist of American Voices YES Academy performances

Playlist includes links to 23 performances of orchestra, dance, and musical theater, ranging from 30 seconds to 13 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL597E3C3A9E678472>

Youtube playlist of American Voices HipHop ‘Hiplomacy’ performances

Playlist includes links to 9 hip hop dance performances in Jordan, India, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Cambodia.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4328BF1A6A8032D4>

Youtube playlist of American Voices Jazz Bridges performances

Playlist includes links to 15 jazz performances ranging from 30 seconds to 8 minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5FE0EE36347C8265>