

THE REAL AMBASSADORS

Dave and Lola Brubeck
and Louis Armstrong
Challenge Segregation



KEITH HATSCHEK

THE REAL AMBASSADORS

*Dave and Iola Brubeck and Louis Armstrong
Challenge Segregation*

Keith Hatschek

Foreword by Yolande Bavan

University Press of Mississippi / Jackson

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Foreword | IX |
| Prologue. | XI |
| Chapter 1. Meet the Brubecks. | 3 |
| Chapter 2. Words and Music | 11 |
| Chapter 3. Becoming Jazz Ambassadors | 24 |
| Chapter 4. Finding a Producer | 35 |
| Chapter 5. Joe Glaser. | 40 |
| Chapter 6. Standing Up to Segregation | 52 |
| Chapter 7. Securing Satchmo | 59 |
| Chapter 8. Gathering Momentum | 67 |
| Chapter 9. A Promising Proposal: <i>The Real Ambassadors</i> in London. | 73 |
| Chapter 10. Recording <i>The Real Ambassadors</i> | 84 |
| Chapter 11. The Most Expensive Demo Ever Made | 98 |
| Chapter 12. Messengers of Change | 117 |
| Chapter 13. The Road to Monterey | 126 |
| Chapter 14. A Night to Remember | 139 |
| Chapter 15. Reception and Reactions. | 158 |
| Chapter 16. Rediscovering <i>The Real Ambassadors</i> | 188 |
| Epilogue. | 213 |
| Acknowledgments | 227 |
| Notes | 232 |
| Index | 269 |

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Activity was building rapidly toward the show's premiere. On September 14, Iola Brubeck sent Jimmy Lyons a sketch for the stage setup, which Lyons passed on to his stage manager, Paul Vieregge. In the letter, Iola provides detailed instructions on lighting intensities and placements, requests a follow spot for Armstrong, and suggests that McRae be positioned slightly closer to Brubeck's trio, with Armstrong placed nearer his own band to facilitate soloing with them.¹

The jazz-savvy Northern California audience was well apprised of the music and its message, as Ralph J. Gleason had been penning a series of advance stories in the *San Francisco Chronicle* extolling the qualities of the show in August and September 1962. One week before the premiere, on September 16, the paper's Sunday-edition weekend entertainment section, dubbed "This World," featured the musical and an illustration of Brubeck on its cover and a major story inside. The centerpiece of the insert was Gleason's lengthy feature advance story, titled "Louis Represents the Human Race: A 'Domestic Peace Corps' Will Gather at Monterey." The article outlined the story of the musical and, quoting liberally from the show's lyrics and album liner notes, attempted to attract jazz fans and the general public to the musical's ambitious message. Gleason made plain that in his estimation, jazz was the perfect vehicle to address both the central role the music was then playing in improving US relations abroad while also addressing social issues at home.

"In my humble way, I'm the USA."—Louis Armstrong in *The Real Ambassadors*

That magnetic attractiveness of American jazz, which has resulted in its being better received abroad than at home in many cases, has been attributed by some observers to the concept expressed in Louis' line quoted above.

Jazz—to those outside the U.S.—seems to have become a distillation of that great American dream whose revolutionary approach shook up and inspired the entire world in the Eighteenth Century and continues to do so, though less dramatically, today. The great qualities of unorthodoxy and equality; the virtues of improvisation and the potential for everyone to be his own Horatio Alger, however battered and shell-torn by our own inadequacies and others' momentary strength . . . continue to wave before the world the hope of a kind of human freedom otherwise unknown. Jazz encompasses all of this ethic.

Within its own small world, it practices what the rest only preach and exemplifies what all could be by the example of the few. In a way, this is the virtue of the jazz festival . . . the jazz musicians who play there and the audience they gather become a sort of domestic peace corps.

The Real Ambassadors is no Pollyanna production. There are irony and social comment in it as well as a deep religious feeling about jazz as an instrument of truth and sanity and peace.

Louis sings, "In my humble way, I'm the USA, though I represent the Government, the Government don't represent some policies I'm for. Oh, we learned to be concerned about the constitutionality, in our Nation segregation isn't a legality. Soon our only differences will be in personality. That's what I stand for." And of course, that is exactly what all of the real jazz, the real ambassadors and the real Americans stand for as well and this concept is one of the things that makes jazz music—American jazz music—the beginning of a new international language in the best image of that American revolution which inspired the world.

Do not pass this up as mere programming . . . This is a message that reaches far out beyond the music itself, though stemming from it. All of us can learn from this remarkable amalgam of music, social thought, religion and joy. "They say I look like God," Louis sings in humbleness. "Could God be black?" Could be.²

While Gleason, as cofounder of Monterey, would benefit from a well-attended festival, his enthusiasm is obvious in the depth and level of engagement of his discussion in this and other articles and reviews on the musical published before and after its Monterey performance.

The next day, on Monday, September 17, 1962, the musicians converged on the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco for their one rehearsal. Yolande Bavan recalled that when she met Iola for the first time at the September 17



The cast of *The Real Ambassadors* at their daylong rehearsal, Monday, September 17, 1962, at San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel. Back row, *left to right*, Howard Brubeck, Danny Barcelona, Eugene Wright, Joe Morello, Billy Cronk, Dave Lambert, Yolande Bavan, Jon Hendricks, and Iola Brubeck; front row, *left to right*, Trummy Young, Carmen McRae, Louis Armstrong, and Dave Brubeck. Not shown, clarinetist Joe Darensbourg. Photo by V. M. Hanks. Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, © Dave Brubeck.

rehearsal, she was “an amazing presence, not just because of her height—but she exuded a sense of movement—while keeping her feet very firmly planted on the ground. She had passion.”³ At the outset, Iola explained the staging to the cast, noting that she would be on an adjacent and separate stage in the role of narrator. Photos documenting this rehearsal reveal both the *esprit de corps* that was emerging as well as the intensity that the cast brought to their daylong study and preparation for the premiere. The superb musician-ship of the cast, along with the timely coaching of Howard, Iola, and Dave Brubeck, resulted in a most productive day. Brubeck drummer Joe Morello recalled the integral role Howard Brubeck played in the show’s preparation and performance: “He was a great musician and prepared the books for each of us to use, then joined us to play the chimes during the performance.”⁴

This rehearsal further validated jazz as an international melting pot and demonstrated the scope of the many interlocking relationships that had been established by American jazz ambassadors throughout the 1950s. As Yolande Bavan walked into the rehearsal and was introduced to the musicians, Louis Armstrong smiled, turned to his wife Lucille, and said, “Hey mama, I know



A candid shot from the same day, showing the musicians with their noses buried in their respective performance binders, which had been prepared by Howard Brubeck. He is sitting in the right background and looking toward Louis Armstrong. Armstrong's clarinetist, Joe Darensbourg, who was cropped out of the cast photo, is shown to the left, sitting in front of Lola Brubeck and to the left of trombonist Trummy Young. Photo by V. M. Hanks. Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, © Dave Brubeck.

dat face,” as he gazed at Bavan. She responded, “Louis, I met you in Australia when I was seventeen and I was singing with Graeme Bell.” As it turned out, Louis and Trummy Young had sat in with Bell’s Dixieland group when the All-Stars were touring Australia in the mid-1950s.

Bavan recalled how, as the rehearsal progressed for *The Real Ambassadors*’ premiere, Armstrong impressed everyone with his mastery of the music, showing just how seriously he took the role of Pops and that his repeated listening to the Brubeck home recordings had been an effective review method. “He knew the score cold,” she remembered.⁵ Armstrong also served from the outset as a source of energy to the rest of the performers as they worked through the one-hour concert score. Bavan added, “You only had to look at his face, the way he was beaming, to get a boost. He’d look over every so often, smile at me, and say ‘Hey, mama.’”⁶

She also recalled how Carmen McRae and Trummy Young expounded to her during breaks in the rehearsal about the racial tensions in America and the struggles that people of color, even artists of their stature, faced in

America. These conversations further opened Bavan's eyes to the pervasive and hypocritical impact of segregation practices on the music and entertainment industry of 1962. Bavan learned that prior to her joining the trio, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross had been prevented from making television appearances on every major variety and talk show, such as *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *Merv Griffin*, and *David Frost*, simply because the trio was integrated. "The only exception," she recalled, "was Steve Allen, who had them on and later had us on his show in spite of the limitations."⁷ After Bavan's performances as a member of Lambert, Hendricks & Bavan, the trio and their backing musicians were regularly denied rooms since they were integrated. She recalled one instance where the group arrived at their hotel after a performance in South Carolina, and Bavan and Lambert were offered rooms, while Jon Hendricks and their backing trio were told they would have to find other accommodations. Dave Lambert simply said, "We're not staying here; we'll find another place to sleep." That ended up requiring a ninety-minute drive before they were finally able to rest for the night, Bavan recalled.⁸ The fact that such experiences were commonplace helped the cast of *The Real Ambassadors* to bring a sharpened awareness to the show's messages.

Concurrently, plans for the Monterey staging were moving forward. Paul Vieregge was the stage manager for the Monterey Jazz Festival from its inception, continuing in that role for the next forty-two years until 2000. Vieregge had concerns that related to three areas necessary to stage *The Real Ambassadors* successfully: constructing an adequate stage, providing rudimentary theatrical lighting (including a follow spot for Pops), and meeting the costuming requests that Iola Brubeck had made to Jimmy Lyons for Pops and the Greek chorus.

Vieregge recalled that in 1962, the fairgrounds' arena was in the process of being built. The State Fair Board had allocated money to build grandstands surrounding the horse arena, but due to a strike by the builders union, the work would not be completed in time for the festival. In fact, he remembered, the large roof sections were laid out in the center of the arena, making that area unusable. Paul's solution was to construct a smaller temporary enclosure at the east end of the fairgrounds, where a stage would be built just for that year's festival. When Jimmy Lyons related the plans Iola was making for the show to be staged, which included her role as narrator, Paul realized that he and his crew would also have to improvise the auxiliary stage where Iola would stand apart from the main characters in her role as narrator. Thus, the first problem of where to stage the show would be solved.

Since Armstrong was the lead character, Vieregge decided to visit him at his San Francisco hotel to discuss the lighting and staging. Armstrong

surprised Vieregge by greeting him in undershorts, wearing his Star of David around his neck. He came to his hotel room door, smiled, and quipped to Vieregge, "What? You didn't know I was a Jewish jig?" Vieregge explained to the veteran showman how he planned to set up and light the performers, with his band and Brubeck's facing one another on opposite wings of the main stage. Satchmo would be closer to his band and Carmen would be nearer to Brubeck's, as they were respectively accompanied by each ensemble for their individual numbers. With respect to the lighting, Vieregge explained that with a follow spot, they could mark his on- and offstage entrances. In reference to Iola's costuming notes, Vieregge asked if Armstrong would agree with the suggestion that Pops use a costume of tuxedo, top hat, and attaché case for his entrance onstage as an ambassador. Armstrong said that would be fine. At the meeting's conclusion, Vieregge said that Satchmo "understood what would be expected of him during the performance."⁹

Upon his return to Monterey, Vieregge secured the necessary props and costumes, including the top hat and attaché case. "One of the festival board members was in a community theater group and borrowed the robes with cowls from their wardrobe closet," he recalled. They would serve as the necessary monks' robes to costume Lambert, Hendricks & Bavan. "When they were in their roles as the [Talgallan] people or the Greek chorus, they would have the cowls back, but when they performed the chant-like role of the priests, they pulled up the cowls," Vieregge recalled.

The final challenges to staging the show would have to be solved during the festival itself, because the main stage, lighting standards, and necessary infrastructure were all being set up using temporary resources just days before the festival commenced. Because of the temporary stage and the lighting requirements for the headlining artists on Saturday and Sunday nights, the only available time to position the lighting as requested by Iola was 8:00 Sunday morning. "Lighting director Dick West rearranged the lighting, and visually we created two stages, adjacent to one another, so Iola could be on the second one as narrator," Vieregge stated. "We could black out the main stage for key narration passages."¹⁰

Back at Monterey, early on Sunday afternoon, the cast met on the stage to work out entrances and cues, confirm focus and placement for lights, and ensure that sight lines would be adequate for the performance, since Brubeck would be cueing vocalists for their various entries. They used the stage directions provided by the Brubecks, with the follow spot in place and enough lighting instruments to provide a sense of motion onstage, illuminating or blacking out various characters according to the script. Vocalist, townsper-son, and member of the Greek chorus Yolande Bavan recalled, "There was

movement among the cast, otherwise it would appear to be just a band playing.”¹¹ So for their duets with Armstrong, Lola Brubeck directed McRae or Trummy Young to share center stage with the star. Brubeck remembered, “That hasty so-called rehearsal was absolute chaos, spent on working out lighting cues and entrances . . . no time to think about the actual music, only logistics.” Adding to his concerns, the camaraderie and cooperation from the daylong rehearsal earlier in the week seemed to have disappeared.

Lambert, Hendricks, and Bavan objected to their robes as too hot and too itchy. Armstrong refused to make his first entrance with top hat and attaché case as we had arranged. Lola’s parents, brother, and family had driven down from Stockton and as they sat in seats out front, observing what was happening onstage with the rehearsal, were convinced that the show was destined for disaster.¹²

Satchmo’s refusal to use the props was actually a practical joke played on Dave—one that he didn’t get—as Louis had already agreed to use them in his earlier meeting with Vieregge. Clearly, Brubeck was nervous that the couple’s first large-scale musical collaboration might fall flat on its face, and Glaser’s warnings must have been playing at the back of his mind. Adding to the strain, the music itself was very demanding, especially the fast-paced double-time lyrics sung by the trio, Armstrong’s stanzas with lots of multisyllabic words in “The Real Ambassador” and “King for a Day,” and the complex, dense harmonies sung throughout the piece by Lambert, Hendricks & Bavan. Yolande Bavan remembered, “It was a bit overwhelming because this music wasn’t easy to sing. Some of it is [quite] dissonant. It was a bit scary.”¹³

As he left the stage from the walkthrough, Brubeck was approached by a television crew that was filming selected performances at the festival. They asked if he wanted to film the show for a fee of \$750. Brubeck knew any filming of Armstrong would require Glaser’s permission, so he quickly placed a call to New York. Predictably, Glaser refused to allow the filming to proceed, telling Brubeck, “Dave, wait until we’re in New York where we can do it right. Those people out there are a bunch of amateurs.”¹⁴ Considered from a strictly business point of view, Glaser’s advice made sense, as Armstrong had been the subject of an immensely popular 1957 CBS Television special entitled *Satchmo the Great*, and both Brubeck and Armstrong had frequently appeared on national television. They hardly needed exposure from a local television station. Glaser had only to pick up the phone to speak directly to decision-makers at the three major television networks, as Armstrong was a regular on evening shows across the broadcast dial. Additionally, Glaser

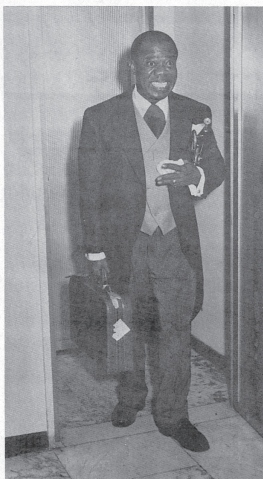
WORLD PREMIERE OF DAVE AND IOLA BRUBECK'S
original musical production
"THE REAL AMBASSADORS"

starring
LOUIS ARMSTRONG CARMEN McRAE DAVE BRUBECK
LAMBERT, HENDRICKS & YOLANDE

The theme of "The Real Ambassadors" is contained in the title. Louis Armstrong, Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie — all of whom have made extensive and highly acclaimed overseas tours under the auspices of the U. S. Department of State — are the "real ambassadors" representing America to foreign peoples. And since jazz has become an international language and a force for world understanding, it may well be that the very phrase "foreign peoples" will one day become happily archaic.

On closing night of the Monterey Jazz Festival, Sunday, September 23 (at 7:15 p.m. *sharp*), one of the most ambitious and unusual programs ever presented on any festival stage will be given its first public performance.

Excerpts from the original musical production "The Real Ambassadors," with music by Dave Brubeck and lyrics by Iola (Mrs. Dave) Brubeck will be presented. Heading the cast will be Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Carmen McRae and the Lambert, Hendricks and Yolande Trio.



20

The official program book for the fifth Monterey Jazz Festival devoted two pages to introducing *The Real Ambassadors* to the audience. The uncredited copy cites the all-important backstage meeting between Brubeck and Armstrong at the Cincinnati Jazz Festival, at which they resolved any misunderstanding about the upcoming concert performance. Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library.

was calculating the moneymaking opportunities that any television production might generate, and the need for a national network and sponsors to be profitable, rather than the potential historical significance the filming of *The Real Ambassadors* Monterey performance might someday have.

Brubeck had to drop the lost opportunity and quickly refocus on the evening's performance, which he would lead from his place at the piano. Having gone back to their hotel to rest and change into their performance attire, Dave and Iola were trying to drive up to the backstage area on the fairgrounds when their car was blocked by an unruly crowd of unticketed hangers-on whom Dave described as "beatniks." "They had had too much to drink and were making remarks about us as we passed. They were not

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo: Dale Pickett

Keith Hatschek is author of three other books on the music industry and directed the music management program at University of the Pacific for twenty years. Prior to becoming an educator, he spent twenty-five years in the music business as a musician, producer, studio owner, and marketing executive.