

Branding Turkey through Jazz: The Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C. as a Liberal Island in the 1930s and 40s*

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Abstract

This article examines how Nesuhi and Ahmet Ertegun, the sons of Turkish ambassador Münir Ertegun, turned the Turkish Embassy in segregated Washington, D.C., into a “liberal island” in the 1930s and 1940s. At 1606 23rd Street, the brothers brought African American and white jazz musicians together for informal jam sessions, transforming an official diplomatic residence into an unconventional racially integrated musical space. Although these gatherings grew primarily out of the brothers’ passion for jazz, the social meaning of the genre and the setting of the embassy gave these sessions broader political significance. As the sons of a high-ranking Turkish diplomat, the Ertegüns branded Turkey, intentionally or not, as liberal, associating it with values such as racial integration, inclusivity, and artistic freedom. The image produced through these events contrasted sharply with racial discrimination in Washington, D.C., while also obscuring the exclusionary policies that marginalized minorities within Turkey itself. This article therefore uses the Ertegun jazz sessions to explore how music contributed to branding an authoritarian Turkey as a liberal state in the United States.

Keywords: United States, Turkey, Nation Branding, Music, Liberalism, Jazz

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Introduction

During the 1930s and 1940s in Washington, D.C., individuals, strolling in the vicinity of Sheridan Circle would often catch melodious jazz sounds coming from a non-conventional venue located at 1606 23rd St.: the Turkish Embassy and Residence of the Turkish ambassador. We now know that the sons of Turkish ambassador Münir Ertegün, Nesuhi and Ahmet, both broke down racial barriers in a segregated city by inviting African American jazz musicians to jam together freely both among each other and together with white musicians.¹⁾ They transformed a political space, the Turkish embassy, through a single genre, jazz, into what I call, a “liberal island”. In doing so, consciously or not, the brothers – sons of a governmental official – sent a political message to citizens of D.C. and beyond: they showcased musically Turkey’s liberal values by promoting both equality and free speech for a minority group, highlighting the contrast with discriminatory practices in the United States.

Most of the current literature on the Ertegün brothers’ endeavours depicts the outstanding life of Ahmet Ertegün as the founder of world-famous Atlantic Records. The brothers’ engagement with African American jazz musicians in the 1930s and 40s has received some attention in articles, books, and documentaries.²⁾ Almost all of them, rightfully, portray the brothers and their father as vanguards in breaking down racial barriers. They attribute this promotion of racial equality to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Western liberal reforms.

Yet this reading takes the scene at the embassy at face value. This article asks how that scene was possible – and what it concealed. How did quasi-diplomatic figures, acting under the auspices of the Turkish Republic, brand Turkey as liberal by inviting African American jazz musicians to the embassy in D.C.? Why, in the first place, was jazz, and why is it still, read as a genre promoting liberal values such as free speech, self-determination, and racial equality? And what should we make of the fact that this liberal projection rested on one countervailing reality that pulled in the opposite direction – a state that assimilated or persecuted its own minorities, Kurds and Armenians among them, and condemned their musical traditions as “backward”. It is precisely against that home practice that the Ertegüns’ promotion of the genre did their branding work and aligned Turkey, in the United States, with those very ideals.

1) Maurice Jackson, “Jazz, ‘Great Black Music’, and the Struggle for Racial and Social Equality in Washington, DC”, in *DC Jazz: Stories of Jazz Music in Washington, DC*, ed. Maurice Jackson and Blair A. Ruble (Georgetown University Press, 2018), 15.

2) Jackson, “Jazz, ‘Great Black Music’, and the Struggle for Racial and Social Equality in Washington, DC”; Susan Steinberg, *Atlantic Records: The House That Ahmet Built* (Thirteen/WNET; American Masters, 2007), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yts5JqI8D7k>; John Edward Hasse, “The Swinging Scions: How the Ambassador’s Sons Jazzed Washington and the Nation”, in *The Turkish Ambassador’s Residence and the Cultural History of Washington, D.C.*, ed. Skip Moskey et al. (Istanbul Kültür University, 2013); *Leave the Door Open*, Documentary, directed by Ümran Saftır (Ekim Medya, 2021); Robert Greenfield, *The Last Sultan: The Life and Times of Ahmet Ertegün* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).



Figure 1. A portrait of the brothers: left (Ahmet Ertegun), right (Nesuhi Ertegun) at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C. William P. Gottlieb/Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress (around the 1940s)

In order to reveal this tension, this article takes the concept of nation branding one step further. It examines how a nation brands itself through music, drawing on what the literature calls musical nation branding. Jessica Gienow-Hecht introduces this concept as an effort to boost a nation's global appeal. Actors, formal or informal, she writes “resort to communication strategies in the form of music . . . to promote willy-nilly the portrayal of their country as an attractive and recognizable actor in the international arena”.³⁾ Here, music serves as a powerful conduit for expressing political ideologies, national identities, and desired aspirations. As Gienow-Hecht further asserts, music transcends its role as a simple diplomatic tool and becomes a platform for conveying values, customs, and ideas, enabling both subtle, indirect interactions and more direct encounters between individuals and groups across borders.⁴⁾ What that platform actually achieves in any given case is another question – a

3) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Of Dreams and Desire: Diplomacy and Musical Nation Branding since the Early Modern Period”, in *International Relations, Music and Diplomacy: Sounds and Voices on the International Stage*, 1st ed. 2018, ed. Cécile Prévost-Thomas and Frédéric Ramel, The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy (Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 268.

4) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Sonic History, or Why Music Matters in International History”, in *Music and International History in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 7, ed. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Explorations in Culture and International History Series (Berghahn Books, 2015), 12.

question nearly impossible to answer. More important in the case of the jam session is what they reveal about aspirations: how the brothers and their father wished their nation to be seen abroad, and how music helped them stage that image.

To place these events in proper historical perspective, we must first examine the nation building process in Turkey after the demise of the Ottoman Empire and ask which political realities were at play.

The Establishment of the Turkish Republic and its Modernisation Reforms

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the Turkish Republic took its place in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a revolutionary and military leader, set out to remake the country's political, economic, social, and cultural life from the ground up. He and his fellows held two convictions at once: they maintained that "Turkish civilization" was inherently equal to that of the West and therefore deserved recognition as part of it. At the same time, the Kemalist elites believed – much like Japan in the Meiji Restoration or Siam under Mongkut and Chulalongkorn – that selectively adopting Western institutions was essential to be recognized as modern and to deter further foreign invasions. To produce a new "Turkish-Western civilization", the government launched sweeping social and cultural policies grounded in liberal principles: the secularisation of state power, the abolition of Islamic-Sharia law, the adoption of European civil and penal codes, a secular national education system, and the extension of suffrage and electoral candidacy to women. In short: modernisation, in the Turkish sense, meant the graft of selected Western norms onto what officials presented as authentic Turkish roots, a project designed to place the nation on equal footing with the leading Western powers.⁵⁾

Since the West served as the model of progress, officials equated modern music with Western classical music; this sound, they held, symbolised the new Turkish "civilization". Turkey therefore had to adopt Western musical styles, selectively blended with Anatolian folk elements, to claim its place in the "civilized" world.⁶⁾ The intellectual scaffold for this synthesis was provided by the sociologist and nationalist thinker Ziya Gökalp,⁷⁾ widely regarded as the most influential intellectual of early Republican Turkey. Culture, for Gökalp had to rest on the music of Anatolian peasants; civilization, on the musical techniques of the West. Turks could thus be both national and European at once. To make the synthesis real, the government sent students to Europe for training in Western musical techniques and tasked

5) Ayhan Kaya and Ayşe Tecmen, "Turkish Modernity: A Continuous Journey of Europeanisation", *Palgrave Macmillan*, Europe, Nations, and Modernity, 2011, 23.

6) Ayhan Erol, "Music, Power and Symbolic Violence: The Turkish State's Music Policies during the Early Republican Period", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 35–52.

7) Niyazi Berkes, ed., *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Gökalp* (Columbia University Press, 1959).

Turkish musicians to develop a classical music style built on traditional folk songs of Turkey. One result was the work of Ahmet Adnan Saygun, whose polyphonic folk songs, such as *Asker oldum Piyade* (I became a soldier, an infantryman) and *Ayşem nereden geliyon* (Ayşem, where are you coming from), sit in the four-voice style of Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by soprano, tenor, alto, and bass. Turkish officials and musicians treated this genre as the emblem of Western modernity and as an ideal vehicle for Turkey's new modern identity.

These strict definitions of music and culture in everyday life rested on an ethnically predefined template and amounted to a top-down approach. Touraj Atabaki has called it “authoritarian modernity”, a regime that reflected Atatürk's vision of the state: hierarchical, homogenous, and disciplined.⁸⁾ To realise that vision, Turkish leaders forcibly assimilated Muslim minorities, Kurds chief among them, into the new Republic.⁹⁾ Official ideology portrayed Kurds as “Mountain Turks”, who had drifted from their supposed Turkish origins and needed to be re-absorbed into the nation.¹⁰⁾ The government introduced a centralised, Turkish-only model of public education, compulsory in schools, with other languages, Kurdish above all, banned from public use. The state brutally suppressed two Kurdish uprisings, the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925 and the Ararat rebellion of 1930 and conducted further military operations under the rubrics of “re-education” (*Tedip*) and destruction purposes (*Tenkil*).¹¹⁾ Non-Muslim minorities, such as Pontic Greeks, experienced the process differently. Under the Turkish Greek population exchange from 1923 to 1925, many Greeks were forced from their homes in Turkey and migrated to Greece. Armenians, still living with the aftermath of genocide in 1915, faced exclusion from much of public life. Together, these measures reveal that Atatürk and his entourage, much like nation-builders in other Western states, defined modernisation as the exclusion of any tradition unsuited to a uniform nation-state.

Music sat at the centre of this homogenisation project. The government banned or appropriated every musical style that fell outside the approved canon. Turkish classical music was an early target.¹²⁾ Gökalp argued that it had been shaped by Byzantine and Arab elements, belonged to an older Islamic civilisational sphere and could therefore never represent the new Turkish nation. The government forced institutions teaching Turkish classical music

8) Touraj Atabaki and Erik Jan Zürcher, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Ataturk and Reza Shah* (I.B. Tauris, 2016).

9) Soner Çağaptay, “Reconfiguring the Turkish Nation in the 1930s”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 8, no. 2 (2002): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110208428662>.

10) Christina Hough, “Obscured Hybridity. The Kurdishness of Turkish Folk Music”, *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 15 (2010): 2.

11) Ismail Küpeli, *Die kurdische Frage in der Türkei: Über die gewaltsame Durchsetzung von Nationalstaatlichkeit*, Edition Politik 136 (transcript Verlag, 2022), 205.

12) Turkish classical music is based on *makam*, which are melodically modes determined by microtones, and are in general a collection of musical traditions with roots from the Ottoman Empire, see Audrey M. Wozniak, “Orienting a Nation: The Turkish National Anthem Controversies”, *Music & Politics* 17, no. 2 (2023): 1; Orhan Tekelioğlu, “Modernizing Reforms and Turkish Music in the 1930s”, *Turkish Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 95.

in public and private schools either to close or to change their curricula into a Western model. It closed the dervish lodges where this music had lived as part of religious practice, and for several years it banned Turkish classical music from radio broadcasting altogether. The ban also reached Armenian musicians, who for centuries had performed Turkish classical music in the imperial courts of the sultans. Any performance that affirmed the identity of minority groups, such as Kurdish folk songs, counted as resistance.¹³⁾ As the ethno-musicologist Ozan Aksoy shows, because the state outlawed public use of the Kurdish language, virtually all Kurdish music in Turkey became protest music by definition.¹⁴⁾ Accordingly, Turkish musicians often reworked melodies encountered in rural regions, largely irrespective of linguistic variation and local difference, and reframed them as Turkish folk music.¹⁵⁾

Atatürk and his entourage envisioned the Turkish Republic, founded in 1923, as a state that mirrored Western practices while resting on what officials presented as a distinct Turkish culture. The reforms, adopting Western political, economic, and cultural patterns, were meant to lift Turkey to the status of a civilised nation. Liberal in some respects, the project was, in execution, fundamentally authoritarian in its cultural policies, and especially in its musical policies of exclusion and forced assimilation of minorities. Where the Turkish state at home defined its music by what it excluded, the embassy in Washington, as we will see later, defined it by what it included.

U.S.-Turkish Relations in the Interwar Era

The sweeping reforms Atatürk launched at home meant little without foreign recognition. The Republican elite had to convince foreign audiences that Turkey belonged among the legitimate, Western-oriented states of the postwar order. One of the foremost foreign targets of the new Turkish government was the United States. Atatürk wanted to convince the latter, perhaps more than any other country, that “New Turkey” was modern and liberal.

But what made the United States a primary target of Turkish foreign image politics? U.S. recognition promised to strengthen Turkey’s international standing after the territorial losses, political upheaval, and economic devastation. While Europe drew Turkish distrust after World War I, the United States did not, having stayed out of the carve-up of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶⁾ Turkish officials sought U.S. expertise in economic development, education, cotton cultivation, public health, and mineral prospecting. U.S. officials and private actors, for their part, saw

13) Hough, “Obscured Hybridity. The Kurdishness of Turkish Folk Music”, 2.

14) Ozan Aksoy, “The Politization of Kurdish Folk Songs in Turkey in the 1990s”, *Journal of Musical Anthropology of the Mediterranean* 11 (2006): 4.

15) Erol, “Music, Power and Symbolic Violence: The Turkish State’s Music Policies during the Early Republican Period”, 43.

16) Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Challenging the Stereotypes: Turkish-American Relations in the Inter-War Era”, *Middle Eastern Studies* (London) 42, no. 2 (2006): 231.

economic possibilities in the new republic and wanted to protect U.S. missionaries, educators, archaeologists, and business interests already active in the region. They also interpreted Turkey as a possible model of Westernisation and secular reform for the broader Middle East.¹⁷⁾

Still, the relationship between the United States and Turkey remained limited until 1927. The U.S. side posed a particular problem: negative stereotypes about Turks ran deep in the U.S. imagination. The genocide of Armenians carried out by the Ottoman state in 1915, and the subsequent negative publicity by both Armenians in exile and by U.S. missionaries, eroded Turkey's image. By the early 20th century, the "Terrible Turk" – a bearded, hook-nosed barbarian and keeper of white women in harems – circulated as a common U.S. stereotype, and it weighed on "U.S. minds".¹⁸⁾ To counter prevailing stereotypes, change Turkey's image, and strengthen bilateral ties, Atatürk dispatched one of the republic's most accomplished diplomats, Münir Ertegün, to Washington, D.C.

The Ertegüns Challenging Stereotypes in Washington, D.C.

Münir Ertegün¹⁹⁾ was a seasoned Ottoman-trained diplomat whose legal expertise, diplomatic skill, instinct, and political loyalty made him indispensable to Atatürk. He grew up in Istanbul in a prestigious and intellectually engaged household, connected to the *Özbekler Tekkesi*, a dervish lodge. Münir received his law degree in 1908, served in the Ministry of Monuments and Antiquities, and rose to chief legal adviser of the empire.²⁰⁾ In 1920, with the empire in collapse, Münir changed sides and threw his weight behind Atatürk's nationalist movement because he firmly believed that this course of action was necessary to protect the remaining Turkish territories after World War I.²¹⁾ Münir, in his new role, became a key figure in Atatürk's diplomatic efforts with European states:²²⁾ he led the protracted negotiations that produced the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which established the contours of modern-day Turkey. Münir then served as ambassador to France, Switzerland, Great Britain, and, finally, the United States-Mexico City. Along the way he represented the Congress of the Union for the Protection of Industrial Property in The Hague in 1925 and at the League of Nations

17) Şuhnaz Yılmaz, *Turkish-American Relations, 1800-1952: Between the Stars, Stripes and the Crescent*, ed. Charles MacDonald, Studies in International Relations (Routledge, 2015).

18) John M. Vander Lippe, "The 'Terrible Turk': The Formulation and Perpetuation of a Stereotype in American Foreign Policy", *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17 (1997): 39-57.

19) In the following, Münir Ertegün will be referred to by his first name, Münir, to differentiate him from his sons, who shared the same family name.

20) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 13.

21) *Ibid.*, 5.

22) Additionally, Münir served as Atatürk's personal "book collector" during his time in France, sending back books like René Grousset's *Histoire de l'Extrême Orient*. Being Atatürk's personal assistant underscores Münir's direct connection to the new Turkish leader. Atatürk sought to read about "Western culture", demanding for books on Turkish history and how Western intellectuals thought about Turkey. Atatürk sought to not only get educated in these topics but also be part of the Western discourse. See Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Bizim Diplomatlar*, 1st ed., Bilgi Dizisi 6 (Bilgi Yayınevi; Bilgi Dağıtım, 1996), 300.

meetings in Berne.²³⁾

At these forums, Münir's diplomatic work placed him at the centre of Turkey's effort to defend sovereignty over its minority questions. For Kemalist diplomats, like him, the minority question was both a domestic matter and a test of Turkey's claim to sovereign equality within the European-dominated international order: by containing minority claims within the language of domestic sovereignty, Turkish diplomats cast the new republic as an independent and homogeneous nation-state. That framing did two things at once: it deflected European "humanitarian" intervention – the kind that had long served as a pretext for foreign meddling in Ottoman affairs.²⁴⁾ And it pushed back against the image of the "Terrible Turk": that figure belonged to the old empire, and the new republic, so the argument went, simply did not have any minority problem. Münir's experience in this field of diplomatic image politics made him a logical choice for the ambassadorship in the United States. In Washington, D.C., he would confront the same representational problem.

Münir inherited a post his predecessor fought hard to stabilise. Muhtar Mollaoğlu, the first Turkish ambassador to the United States (1927-1933), arrived to a hostile reception. Armenian activists, such as the lawyer and former Ottoman official Vahan Cardashian, drove much of the negative publicity, and shortly after his arrival, Mollaoğlu survived assassination attempts by people who held him personally responsible for the genocide of Armenians. He actively worked to block both Armenian and U.S. newspapers from attacking Turkey's minority policies. During his six-year tenure, he succeeded in transforming Turkey's representation from a target of protests and media attacks into a recognised voice in Washington, D.C. The *Washington Post* praised him as someone who served "his country ably" and was an "outstanding and popular figure in Capital Society".²⁵⁾ Ill health and internal political rivalries in Turkey eventually pushed him out of his position. He resigned in 1933, won a seat as deputy in the city of *Kastamonu*, and died a few weeks later, in 1934.²⁶⁾

Münir took up the same brief: to continue shaping Turkey's image in the United States and to counter Armenian and U.S. critics. One early test came from Hollywood. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer planned to film Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. Werfel, an Austrian Jewish writer who later fled Nazi Germany, told the story of Armenian resistance

23) George S. Harris, "Cementing Turkish-American Relations: The Ambassadorship of (Mehmet) Münir Ertegün", in *Studies in Atatürk's Turkey: The American Dimension*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi and Halil Inalcık, vol. 40, ed. George S. Harris and Bilge Criss, The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage. Politics, Society and Economy (Brill, 2009), 179-80.

24) Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş, *Verflochtene Nationsbildung: Die Neue Türkei und der Völkerbund 1918–38*, Studien zur Internationalen Geschichte 48 (De Gruyter, 2020), 331-33.

25) Evelyn Peyton Gordon, "Envoy to Go, Says Report; Capital Sad. Ambassador of Turkey Again Announced as Retiring", *The Washington Post*, March 07, 1934.

26) George S. Harris, "Repairing Turkish-American Relations after the First World War: Ahmet Muhtar in Washington", in *Studies in Atatürk's Turkey: The American Dimension*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi and Halil Inalcık, vol. 40, ed. George S. Harris and Bilge Criss, The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage. Politics, Society and Economy (Brill, 2009), 174.

against Ottoman atrocities. A film version would have brought the genocide of Armenians to U.S. screens. That threatened to undo much of Mollaoğlu's work at a stroke. Münir intervened directly with both the filmmakers and Wallace Murray, the State Department's head of Near Eastern Affairs. He warned that Turkey would ban all MGM products if the film went ahead.²⁷⁾ He then threatened to expand the pressure internationally by encouraging other states, including Germany and France, to oppose or boycott the film. Turkish newspapers joined the campaign against MGM, and some press attacks against Werfel drew on antisemitic accusations. Münir, together with U.S. ambassador Skinner and other politicians, argued that the film would damage the emerging U.S.-Turkish relationship and pushed the issue forcefully. MGM ultimately dropped the project.²⁸⁾ A Hollywood film depicting the genocide could have reactivated precisely the stereotype of Turks as violent, barbaric, and hostile to minorities that Turkish diplomats spent a decade trying to bury.

Yet Turkish image-making in Washington did not consist only of suppressing such narratives. Münir and his wife, Hayrunnisa Rüstem, cultivated a "Western" appearance and embedded themselves within Washington, D.C.'s diplomatic circles to deepen political, economic, military, and cultural ties.²⁹⁾ Rüstem, herself a musician, played for guests at the Turkish embassies in Berne, Paris, and London and joined the musical life of D.C. once they moved there. Eleanor Roosevelt, for one, befriended Rüstem, took her to a concert by French American opera singer Lily Pons.³⁰⁾ Münir, for his part, patronised charity events and turned up at the social occasions of the diplomatic corps. Together, the couple invited ambassadors and ministers to the Turkish embassy each year to mark the anniversary of the 1923 proclamation of the Turkish Republic.³¹⁾ By the mid-1930s the Ertegüns were well known in Washington, and were personally treated as equals in the diplomatic circles.

Rüstem's musical world also influenced her sons' passion for jazz. Ahmet and Nesuhi first heard jazz in France, where their father served as ambassador. During World War I, the U.S. infantry bands that played throughout Europe brought jazz to Paris, and the brothers were able to access extensive collections of jazz recordings in the city by Josephine Baker, the Mills Brothers, Bing Crosby, and Louis Armstrong. The decisive moment came in London. Ahmet, nine years old, experienced what he later described as a "life-changing" moment and attended, together with Nesuhi, a Duke Ellington concert at the London Palladium. Ellington, grandson of a former slave, played hits such as *Ring Dem Bells*, *Bugle Call Rag*, and *Black and Tan Fantasy*. The Duke of Kent, fourth son of King George V, sat in the audience, as was

27) Harris, "Cementing Turkish-American Relations: The Ambassadorship of (Mehmet) Münir Ertegün", 185.

28) David Welky, "Global Hollywood Versus National Pride: The Battle to Film The Forty Days of Musa Dagh", *Film Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2006): 35-43.

29) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 5.

30) "Official and Resident Society Notes", *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1935, p. 11.

31) Harris, "Cementing Turkish-American Relations: The Ambassadorship of (Mehmet) Münir Ertegün".

a crowd that danced, whistled, and enthusiastically praised the performance. Reflecting on the experience years later, Ahmet put it simply: “Oh my God, this is jazz. This is not the bullshit thing we hear on a record player. This is real jazz . . .”³²⁾ This stellar concert and others they attended, including performances by celebrated jazz singer Cab Calloway, settled the matter once and for all. That is to say: even before they had set foot in the United States, the Ertegün brothers already knew which musicians they wanted to hear, see, and experience. The catch was that, when the family moved to Washington, D.C., the brothers found themselves face to face not just with the music they had been chasing but also with the stark realities of segregation in the city.

Race Politics and Jazz in Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., in the pattern of the U.S. South, was a deeply segregated city. During the Great Migration of the 1910s through the 1940s, African Americans fled lynch mobs and racial oppression in the South for cities further north, Washington among them. The federal government there offered jobs that, over time, built the foundation of an emerging “Black middle class”. At the same time, systemic and institutionalised racism shaped every corner of everyday life. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson, the first Southerner since Reconstruction to become U.S. president, re-segregated the federal civil service. African American workers who held integrated positions found themselves demoted, transferred into separate workspaces, or pushed out altogether. Restaurants, cinemas, schools, and other public spaces excluded Black residents or admitted them only under unequal conditions. Most faced poverty, racially restrictive housing covenants, and persistent economic discrimination. In Washington, a new Black middle class emerged even as equal access to much of the city’s public life remained out of reach.³³⁾

Out of that contradiction grew the “New Negro” movement of the 1920s, a cultural and political struggle closely related to the Harlem Renaissance. It urged African Americans to reject older racist stereotypes and cultivate a new, assertive sense of cultural self-awareness.³⁴⁾ In Washington, D.C., this movement took its own local form as the “Washington Renaissance”. The new Black middle class – educators, writers, and musicians – built its own cultural and intellectual life largely outside the reach of white institutions. U Street thrived as the cultural hub for artists such as Duke Ellington and Claude Hopkins. The Howard Theater, established in 1910 and often called “Black Broadway”, hosted their concerts and drew audiences from across the city. Ahmet, at the age of 14, frequently visited this theatre: “[I] got to hear everyone but used to be the only white person and I was just fourteen”, he later

32) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 12.

33) Jackson, “Jazz, ‘Great Black Music’, and the Struggle for Racial and Social Equality in Washington, DC”, 2.

34) Ibid., 10.

recalled. “The Black people were very nice to white people because they were really scared of them.”³⁵⁾ Against the backdrop of everyday segregation, Black Washington created these spaces and, by their very existence, also a form of cultural protest.³⁶⁾

A telling example of that clash between segregation and Black self-assertion came in 1939, when Marian Anderson, a world-renowned African American contralto, planned to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington. The local chapter of the *Daughters of the American Revolution* (DAR), whose constitution explicitly barred African Americans from the stage, owned the hall and refused her. First Lady and human rights advocate Eleanor Roosevelt, then a member of the DAR, resigned her membership in protest and helped Anderson secure a different venue. Together with Walter White of the NAACP and Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, they arranged for Anderson to give a free concert on Easter Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial. Anderson performed before an integrated audience of roughly 75,000 people, with millions more following the NBC broadcast. She opened, pointedly, with *America*, moved through Franz Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, and closed with spirituals, among them *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*.³⁷⁾

Anderson challenged segregation through her standing as one of the great classical musicians of her generation. The Ertegüns took a different route entirely. What made jazz legible to them, and to their audiences, as a way to push back against the racist reality of D.C.? By the late 1930s, jazz had earned its reputation as a liberal force through two distinct channels at once, one socio-cultural and one musical. Within Black musical and intellectual communities, improvisation, jazz’s most salient feature, enabled African Americans to build “alternative social spaces of engagement and resistance”, as Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble argue.³⁸⁾ Musically, jazz challenged European classical norms by dissolving traditional harmonic, rhythmic, and technical conventions and by elevating improvisation as a legitimate artistic practice in its own right.³⁹⁾ And yet the picture was more complicated than that. The swing bands of the 1930s and 40s were steeply hierarchical: the leader picked the lineup, set the pay, chose the keys, handed out the solos, and decided how long each ran. Even Duke Ellington’s orchestra, so often celebrated as a collective of individual voices, rested on the leader’s final authority over material his sidemen helped create. None of that looked much like the liberal values often projected onto the genre. Read this way, jazz was not inherently inclusive, egalitarian, or liberal.⁴⁰⁾ Therefore, the interpretation of jazz as an inherently liberal

35) Atlantic Records, *The House that Ahmet Built*. 2007.

36) Jackson, “Jazz, ‘Great Black Music’, and the Struggle for Racial and Social Equality in Washington, DC”, 10.

37) *Ibid.*, 10-11.

38) Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, eds., *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, 1st ed, Music/Culture (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 2.

39) Based on: David Borgo, “Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music”, *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 168, Gale Academic OneFile.

40) Benjamin Givan, “How Democratic Is Jazz?”, in *Finding Democracy in Music*, ed. Robert Adlington and Esteban Buch,

form was itself a historical construction, built and contested across Black and white critical traditions through the 1930s and 40s, and later mobilised on a global scale by the U.S. State Department during the Cold War.⁴¹⁾

As we saw, jazz as a genre was highly politically charged. Yet U.S. audiences, critics, and reviewers agreed on one point: jazz sounded modern and belonged to the experience of urban life. As the music critic and scholar Eric Weisbard wrote, jazz embodied “modernism, modernity, and modernization”.⁴²⁾ Modern music, it turns out, meant different things to different people. For the Turkish state, as we saw, it meant European classical forms imposed from above, with a clear intent to homogenise the nation. In Washington, the brothers and their father aligned the Turkish embassy, the very extension of that state’s ideas and ideologies, with a music that stood in direct contrast to its own musical reforms, bound up with Black cultural self-assertion and with a sense of being up to date.

The Erteğün Brothers Turn the Turkish Embassy into a Liberal Island

The Turkish embassy at the centre of all this was itself a remarkable place. When the musicians came up the front steps of it, they stepped into a grand mansion with historical and symbolic weight. The building, French Neoclassical with 15th-century Italianate flourishes, owed its existence to Edward H. Everett, an industrial mogul from Ohio, who made his money in glass-bottle production. In 1907 he commissioned the architect George Oakley Totten Jr. to build a winter residence worthy of his standing in Washington’s social and political elite.⁴³⁾ Totten had already designed the U.S. embassy in Turkey and, in Istanbul, the residence of Grand Vizier Izzet Pasha. After Everett’s death in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, the building lost its former charm and became impractical for seasonal use by wealthy individuals. Seeking a prestigious location for the Turkish Embassy, the Turkish government leased the house from Everett’s widow. In 1936, Münir bought it outright. The Turkish embassy now sat at the heart of the capital’s political life and received Black musicians with the courtesy reserved for foreign diplomats.⁴⁴⁾

It is worth imagining the picture of the scene: Duke Ellington taking off his coat in the

Musical Cultures of the Twentieth Century, ed. Gianmario Borio (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

41) For U.S. jazz diplomacy during the Cold War, see Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy*, California Studies in 20th-Century Music, no. 1 (University of California Press, 2015); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, 1st Harvard University Press paperback edition (Harvard University Press, 2006).

42) Eric Weisbard, “Songbook Historiography: Phases and Stages in the Literature of American Popular Music”, *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 2 (2021): 338-59.

43) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 25; Skip Moskey et al., *The Turkish Ambassador’s Residence and the Cultural History of Washington, D.C.*, Istanbul Kültür University Publication, no. 193 (Istanbul Kültür University, 2013), 50.

44) Moskey et al., *The Turkish Ambassador’s Residence and the Cultural History of Washington, D.C.*, 59.

front hall and handing it to a waiter in a white jacket. Teddy Wilson and Art Hodes making their way to the piano; Lester Young, tenor saxophone in hand, and Joe Marsala, with his clarinet, followed.⁴⁵⁾ All five wore suits, folded white handkerchiefs, and perfectly knotted ties.⁴⁶⁾ Inside the diplomatic building, they were met with a respect and generosity they had rarely encountered. Then they played: swing, mostly, and other jazz styles as the afternoon went on, under the patronage of a massive bust of Atatürk brought back from the Turkish pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Under Atatürk's gaze, at a diplomatic address, on legally Turkish soil, these were among the first racially integrated concerts in Washington, D.C.⁴⁷⁾



Figure 2. Ahmet Ertegun, clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow, pianist Art Hodes, Nesuhi Ertegun, jazz fan Herb Abramson, trombonist Jay Higginbotham, trumpeter Henry “Red” Allen, trombonists Lou McGarity and Benny Morton?, tenor saxophonist Lester Young, and Nesuhi and Ahmet’s cousin Sadi Koylan. Photo: William P. Gottlieb Collection, courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

45) For a partial list of the musicians, see Hasse, “The Swinging Scions: How the Ambassador’s Sons Jazzed Washington and the Nation”, 110.

46) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 32.

47) *Ibid.*, 31.

Word of these gatherings reached Bill Gottlieb, whose Swing Sessions ranked among the first regular jazz columns in a major U.S. daily newspaper, through the D.C. jazz scene.⁴⁸⁾ Gottlieb heard about the ambassador's record-collecting sons and wanted to write about them. He and his wife considered an interview but before Gottlieb approached the brothers, Nesuhi, a regular reader of the *Washington Post* jazz columns, approached him first. He invited Gottlieb to visit the embassy. The columnist accepted and became a regular visitor and chronicler of the jam sessions. He took photographs and published pieces on these unusual afternoons. What struck him most was that the Turkish brothers "knew more about the country's most indigenous music, than did the natives themselves". Even foreigners, in Gottlieb's telling, recognised jazz as American music. Many native-born U.S. Americans did not.

Soon, some Washingtonians proved Gottlieb's point. Ahmet would tell the story, decades later, in interviews. One day, he recalled, an "outraged Southern Senator" wrote his father: "It has been brought to my attention, Sir, that a person of color was seen entering your house by the front door. I have to inform you that in our country, this is not a practice to be encouraged", Münir wrote back: "In my country, friends enter through the front door but if you wish to come to the embassy, you can enter from the back."⁴⁹⁾ The Romanian embassy, across the street, brought a different problem. According to Ahmet, embassy officials would telephone the brothers in the evenings and ask them to silence their "butlers'" music. Münir, in Ahmet's telling, replied that his children studied anthropology, and the musicians formed part of their research.⁵⁰⁾ Both anecdotes, which survive only in Ahmet's retellings, illustrate that to invite these musicians went beyond a mere celebration of jazz music. The same Münir who had, at the League of Nations and again in Washington, defended Turkey's minority policies as an "internal matter", now used the same logic and opposed the segregation policies of his host city: what happened inside the Turkish embassy, was Turkey's business.

For the brothers, the halls of the embassy were a beginning rather than an end. They extended these kinds of integrated concerts throughout Washington, D.C. In 1942, they organised jazz concerts featuring Black musicians for integrated audiences across the capital. Suitable venues were hard to come by. Only the Jewish Community Center opened its doors. Two Turks, a Jewish Hall, Black jazz musicians, an integrated audience, this combination directly challenged the city's segregation. For their second show, the Ertegün brothers leveraged their position as the ambassador's sons and pressured the National Press Club, located at 14th and F Street, to host similar concerts. They made clear that they would cause a significant protest if the Club refused to let them rent it. Münir's political position and weight

48) Bill Gottlieb, "Two Turks, Hot for U.S. Swing", *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1943; Bill Gottlieb, "Swing Sessions", *The Washington Post*, May 23, 1943.

49) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*, 32.

50) Atlantic Records, *The House that Ahmet Built*. 2007.

settled it, and the first concert opened as *Swing-time in the Capital – A Jam Session of Jazz Giants*.⁵¹⁾

The brothers' passion for jazz music and their status as the sons of the Turkish ambassador to the United States gave them the opportunity to challenge the segregated environment for jazz enthusiasts in D.C. Münir, by establishing a "liberal island" under Turkey's diplomatic auspices, allowed African Americans to perform freely and get treated equally. Together with his sons, Münir stood by these musicians against external opposition. In doing so, he portrayed Turkey as a nation open to minority voices, an image the Turkish state itself did not match at home.

Conclusion

The invitation extended by the Ertegün brothers to African American jazz musicians to perform at the Turkish embassy is unique. At first glance, it is true that the brothers' activities grew from their passion for jazz music. They carried no official mandate, and their somewhat defiant actions were not untypical of youngsters. But looking at the story more closely, the jam sessions by African Americans at the Turkish embassy inevitably bore a political dimension. As sons of the ambassador, the brothers could rely on political protection due to their status. Their father enjoyed Turkish political rights at the embassy building, which kept racist congressmen and neighbours from interfering. Those complaints risked undermining Turkish governmental efforts to build good relations with the United States. And still, the Turkish ambassador took that risk to give African American musicians a voice, at least on his own soil.

Read through the frame of musical nation branding, the ambassador's decision to allow these concerts rested on several reasons, not mutually exclusive but reinforcing each other: (1) the ambassador could aim to engage with the goals of the Turkish government domestically and internationally. Atatürk and his associates were determined to not only convince the international community but also brand Turkey domestically as modern, liberal and inclusive. The ambassador's act of hosting a marginalised minority bolstered this ideology, despite the Turkish government's illiberal policies against its own minorities. One of Münir's primary objectives as a diplomat was to counter bad publicity that tarnished Turkey's reputation, particularly regarding minority issues. While actively working to suppress narratives of genocide, inviting other minorities to the embassy promised to counterbalance Turkey's prevailing negative image. More importantly, the ambassador asserted that the "Terrible Turks" were even more liberal than the United States. (2) It is also true that, at the same time, the situation

51) Greenfield, *The Last Sultan*.

arose from a personal matter as the embassy served as an oasis within the United States. The Turkish ambassador, in his role as a father, genuinely regarded these musicians as friends of his children and allowed them to perform there. This private initiative transformed the embassy into a “liberal island” and, whether intentional or not, sought to brand Turkey as a liberal state by associating it with these musicians.

Some contemporary writings of the brothers’ guests show their appreciation of these gatherings. Pianist Meade Lux Lewis, a regular performer at the embassy, named one of his compositions “Turkish Rag” as a “thank you” gift.⁵²⁾ Duke Ellington, writing a guest column in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, put it with characteristic wit: “So we ‘jammed’ until the ‘wee’ hours of the morning, all in the cause of cementing Turkish-American good will with American ‘jam’.” His somewhat jokey statement made clear that the musicians recognised the political setting in which the brothers operated. Ellington capped it: “But I can’t write about that without the approval of the Department of State”, a foreshadowing of his later Cold War tours abroad as a State Department cultural ambassador.⁵³⁾ The embassy offered African American musicians a glimpse of the Turkey, Münir and his sons imagined and wished to project. The musicians engaged with that vision knowingly, and Ellington’s joke left no doubt that they recognised the political register they all operated in together.

When Münir died in 1944, after ten years as ambassador, both the Turkish and U.S. government mourned him. Two years after he passed away, his remains were transported back to Turkey on the *USS Missouri*. After World War II both Turks and U.S. Americans celebrated his legacy, with the media in both countries paying tribute in their articles. As Roosevelt said in a press release:

“I am deeply grieved by the news of the sudden death of my personal friend the Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Erteğün. Turkish interests in this country have been ably represented by him for more than ten years and during this period, I, along with hundreds of others both in and out of the Government have come to esteem him as a diplomat of the highest type, kindly, sincere, and accomplished. His personal integrity was outstanding.”⁵⁴⁾

52) Carolyn Bell, “Nesuhi Ertegun, Hepcat. Son of Turkish Envoy Says Jazz is U.S. Classic”, *The Washington Post*, August 29, 1942.

53) Duke Ellington, “The Duke Takes Pen In Hand: Result Is Interesting Guest Column For Harold Jovien”, *New Journal and Guide*, August 1, 1942.

54) Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Statement Released to the Press upon the Death of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Erteğün*, November 11, 1944, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V*, Document 978, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d978>

After Münir's death, his sons continued living in the United States and expanded their jazz records collection. Their actions culminated in the founding of Atlantic Records, a record company specialising, in its early years, in jazz, R&B, and soul by artists such as Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett, Ruth Brown, Otis Redding, and others. Atlantic Records went on to become one of the world's largest jazz record labels and remains prominent in the record industry today, featuring artists such as Ed Sheeran, Bruno Mars, Coldplay, Lil Uzi Vert, Cardi B, and others. Today, Atlantic Records Group LLC is an umbrella label owned by Warner Music Group and celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2022.

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