On November 6, 1955, a foreign correspondent for the New York Times declared “America’s secret weapon” in the Cold War to be “a blue note in a minor key.” Since then, countless scholars have designated the mid-1950s as the beginning of American jazz diplomacy, with the Soviet Union and Africa as primary targets. But as this chapter makes clear, the United States government’s use of jazz as a tool for suppressing Communism began in Italy at least a decade earlier and set the stage for the well-known Jazz Ambassadors program launched by President Eisenhower in 1954.

As I explain in my recent book, Jazz Italian Style: From Its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra (2017), Italy posed a problem for the United States at the conclusion of the Second World War. Whereas England, France, and Germany had always looked to jazz as a “foreign” art form, “exotic” in nature, with indelible connections to African American culture, Italy embraced jazz, at least in part, as a “native” art form. This was largely due to the release of the first jazz recording, “Jazz Band One-Step” and “Livery Stable Blues” by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1917. The band’s leader/trumpet player (Nick LaRocca) and drummer and (Tony Sbarbaro) were the children of Italian immigrants who had moved to New Orleans at the turn of the century. Their Italian heritage led listeners in Italy to claim that the origins of jazz could be linked to Italy. Consequently, as the Jazz Age spread across the Atlantic, Italian Futurists praised “the virile energy” of jazz. Mussolini described it as the voice of Italian youth, and musicians, mesmerized by its “progressive” sounds, abandoned the Italian opera houses and conservatories for the dance halls and dinner clubs that had begun to populate the urban centers between Rome and Milan (Celenza 2017, 3–4).

This chapter picks up the story at the end of the Second World War, when musicians who had thrived under Mussolini’s protection began distancing themselves from their past and rewriting the history of Italian jazz. The United States (US) State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played decisive roles in this conscious erasure of Italian jazz. In an effort to redefine jazz as a symbol of American Democracy, the US poured money into a wide range of propaganda efforts, from V-Discs and periodicals to jazz festivals and radio programming. And in each of these efforts, the music promoted was largely limited to American jazz composed and performed by black musicians.
The Final Years of WWII

American troops landed in Sicily on July 10, 1943, and Italy’s political landscape underwent a drastic transformation. On July 25, the Fascist Grand Council voted to oust Mussolini, and under orders from King Victor Emmanuel III, he was arrested and eventually jailed on Gran Sasso, in the Apennine Mountains. Italy’s new prime minister, General Pietro Badoglio, signed an armistice with the US and its allies on September 3. Nine days later, Mussolini was liberated from Gran Sasso by German paratroopers under orders of Hitler and appointed leader of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI)—informally known as the Republic of Salò—a puppet state established by German forces in the Italian regions north of Rome. German occupation of the northern half of the peninsula sparked a civil war in Italy, and divisions between the nation’s two regions deepened as the Axis-controlled North fought against the Allied-controlled South (Celenza 2017, 159).

As the US and British troops moved their way north from Sicily in 1943, one of their primary objectives was to take control of each region’s communication systems, including newspapers, and most importantly Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche (EIAR), the national radio broadcasting system established by Mussolini in 1927. The EIAR transmitter in Palermo was the first to be seized, on August 6, 1943. Next came the transmitter in Bari (September 23) followed by the takeover of the EIAR transmitter in Naples (October 14). Every time, the radio stations were manned with personnel from the Propaganda War Bureau (PWB) and transformed into Anglo-American communication centers. The Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), which had been established by the US War Department in May 1942, was given the mission of providing entertainment that simultaneously comforted soldiers and opposed propaganda broadcasts (Historical Summary: American Forces Radio and Television Service, n.d.)

The American troops who manned the captured EIAR stations in Italy brought V-discs, short for Victory Discs, with them. These long-playing, 12-inch 78 rpm gramophone discs were sponsored by the Music Branch of the Special Division of the War Department and manufactured by RCA and Columbia beginning 1943. The US government quickly realized that the American broadcasts, especially the programming featuring jazz, appealed to local populations (Celenza 2017, 161). The V-Disc effectively spread American culture and in doing so became an essential tool of soft diplomacy. In total, just over 905 disks, which carried upwards of 2,700 separate compositions, made their way into Italy, where they were used to fill the programming of the EIAR radio stations controlled by the Allies in Palermo, Bari and Naples (Piazzoni 2011, 35–36).

In the North, where the Germans had installed Mussolini as the figurehead of the RSI, Italian jazz continued to be presented as a product of youthful modernity, and the stars of Italian jazz who remained in the RSI—most notably Gorni Kramer, Cinico Angelini, Pippo Barzizza, Alberto Rabagliati, Natalino Otto, and the Trio Lescano—continued to record jazz-infused songs for the Italian record labels Cetra and Fonit and foreign affiliates like Parlophon. They also continued to sing on EIAR broadcast in the RSI. Although the Lescano sisters were Jewish, they nonetheless held their exalted position in Northern Italy. Mussolini had granted them Italian citizenship in 1941, and in 1942 they joined the Fascist party (Celenza 2017, 158).

The continued popularity of Italian jazz among many Italian listeners no doubt influenced Mussolini to use radio as a means of garnering support from the Italian population. In the summer of 1944, Mussolini established a new radio station called Radio Tevere (Galligani 2012, 170–171; Isola 1966, 110). Listeners believed the transmission was a clandestine broadcast coming from within Rome. The first broadcast took place on June 10, 1944, just one week after the capture of Rome by Allied forces (Celenza 2017, 170).

Radio Tevere should not be confused with the English-language program, “Jerry’s Front Calling,” transmitted by the German forces from Rome (1943) and then Como (1944–45). Hosted by
Rita Louise Zucca, the Italian “Axis Sally,” this broadcast was aimed at Allied soldiers. The music performed was American swing and the commentary was propaganda aimed at weakening the morale of Allied troops (“Americans Seize Axis Sally in Italy” 1945, 9).

Radio Tevere transmitted during the evening hours—from 8:00pm to 1:00am—and its goal was to attract Italian listeners in the South and regain support for Mussolini. The tone of Radio Tevere was relatively neutral, yet its alliance with Mussolini and Italian Fascism was not difficult to recognize. The primary content of Radio Tevere was Italian jazz, and the broadcasts proved popular among Italian listeners, primarily because the programming was unlike anything else on the airwaves at the time. Romano Mussolini, the dictator’s youngest son, remembered listening to the broadcasts regularly during the final months of the war (Celenza 2017, 170–72).

By the winter of 1945, jazz had become the primary weapon in a “war of the airwaves” that raged across Italy, with Allied Forces Radios broadcasting American jazz on one side and Mussolini’s Radio Tevere transmitting Italian jazz on the other. Despite the growing oppression of German forces in the RSI, Italian jazz survived as a cultural symbol of Mussolini’s Italy (Celenza 2017, 172). But this would not last long.

As Allied forces worked their way up the Italian peninsula, more and more Italians abandoned Mussolini and the RSI. By the spring of 1945, the V-disc had turned American jazz into the soundtrack for everything anti-Fascist—liberty, democracy, racial equality. On April 26, Allied forces took control of the transmitters for Radio Tevere and EIAR Milan. The next day, Communist partisans captured Mussolini, his mistress Clara Petacci and a group of Fascist officials as they attempted to cross the border into Switzerland. Mussolini and the others were executed by gunfire the next day, then transported back to Milan, where their corpses were pelted, spat upon, kicked and disfigured by an angry mob (Luzzatto 2014, 68–71). From that day forward, the concept of jazz as a symbol of the Fascist state was willingly abandoned. As the war came to an end, there was a widespread “conviction that the name and very idea of Italy had been irreparably sabotaged by Fascism” (Lanaro 1992, 18). This conviction tended to encourage, both in public speeches and policy, a rejection of Italy’s immediate past and a turning outward to embrace the cultural traditions of the US.

On April 29, 1945, General Heinrich von Vietinghoff signed the instrument of surrender on behalf of the German forces in Italy. Italian jazz musicians quickly responded. For example, in an effort to show his loyalty to the American and British troops, Gorni Kramer published a fox-trot titled “Black and Johnny.” The cover of the sheet music bears a pair of US and British flags, the date “April 30, 1945,” and the following inscription: “Ai valorosi soldati alleati gli autori dedicanno” (Dedicated by the authors to the valorous Allied soldiers). Various recordings of “Black and Johnny” were released shortly after the publication of the sheet music, the most popular being those performed by Kramer and Natalino Otto in 1945 on the Fonit label and by Ernesto Bonino and the Pippo Barzizza Orchestra in 1946 on the Cetra label. Kramer was also one of the first musicians in Italy to embrace Bebop, a new style of jazz imported by the Americans via V-Disc just after the war’s conclusion (Salvetti and Antolini 1999, 312). Kramer recorded his “Picciando in Be-bop” (Fonit 12957 B) in Turin on November 1, 1948.

**US Interventions After the War**

The US State Department willingly assisted Italians in their attempts to forget the links between Fascism and jazz, despite being advised by specialists to refrain from launching propaganda campaigns in Europe at the war’s conclusion. For example, in October 1945, Howard Laswell—a political scientist from Yale considered the leading authority on propaganda at the time—submitted a memorandum to the US State Department titled “Information Policies
Concerning Russia,” wherein he advised officials to refrain from embarking on a campaign of psychological warfare.

There is a danger that a cultural armaments race between America and Russia in the countries lying between them—in the form of scientific, artistic, and educational expenditure. Furthermore, there is a danger of aggressive psychological warfare through mass media of communication. We should undertake to obtain joint declarations of policy condemning cultural armaments races and aggressive psychological warfare.

(Laswell 1945)

Although Laswell recommended a truce in the psychological warfare that had begun to develop between the ideals of Democracy and Communism, the US chose a different path. And in Italy, this new clash of cultural armaments employed jazz, specifically, as an effective weapon. There were two basic reasons for this. First—the popularity of the V-Disc program during the final years of the war had proven that American jazz could serve as an effective symbol of American Democracy among Italian audiences. Second—the Communists in Italy had long denigrated jazz as a symbol of corrupt capitalism. For example, in 1927 Antonio Gramsci commented on the arrival of African American jazz in Italy:

If there is a danger, it lies in the Negro music and dancing that has been imported into Europe. This music has completely won over a whole section of the cultured population of Europe, to the point of real fanaticism. It is inconceivable that the incessant repetition of the Negroes’ physical gestures as they dance around their fetishes or that the constant sound of the syncopated rhythm of jazz bands should have no ideological effects.

(Jones 2006, 117)

At the end of the war, Gramsci was promoted by figures such as Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Communist Party in Italy, as the ideal of Italian political culture. And with this renewed veneration of Gramsci came proclamations from the Italian Communist Party that jazz served not only as a symbol of Fascism under Mussolini but also as a symbol of corrupt capitalism in the hands of the Americans. So for the US, promoting jazz in Italy performed by well-known African American musicians offered the opportunity of killing two birds with one stone, in that jazz could effectively be used as a tool to suppress the rise of both neo-Fascists and Communists.

One of the first steps in the Cold War was the establishment of the United States Information Services (USIS), which replaced the Propaganda War Bureau run jointly by the US and Britain during the war. As Simona Tobia notes in her detailed study of the USIS, Advertising America, the government’s choice of the word “Information” in the title of this division of the State Department was just a friendly way of saying “Propaganda” (Tobia 2008, 40). Indeed, the central mission of the USIS was propaganda, and jazz was just one of its initiatives. The USIS set up libraries in Italy and funded publishing and advertising campaigns among other activities. They also facilitated the establishment of various publications, right after the war, whose central mission was to promote American Democracy. Countless articles promoting American jazz appeared in these publications. Some were written by Americans, others were penned by Italians, often with input from American sources. Allow me to offer two representative examples.

The first is a piece published in the inaugural issue of Nuovo Mondo titled “Jazz: Musica popolare che diventa arte.” Written by Rudi Blesh, an up-and-coming music scholar and art critic, the article offered a brief history of jazz, from the arrival of slaves from West Africa in the 1700s to the stars of the swing era: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. Blesh explained that although “jazz was born as the song of men who were not free,” it had evolved in recent times to a
The Birth of Jazz Diplomacy

genre that in its very essence symbolizes freedom. With regards to race, he defined African American jazz as “authentic” and performances by white musicians a “europeanization” of jazz (Blesh 1945). But no matter their race, all jazz musicians had a place in the American soundscape, according to Blesh, and this was demonstrated in the photo spreads accompanying the article. It should be noted that these photographs were taken by photojournalist Gjon Mili and first published in 1943 as part of an article titled “Jam Session” in LIFE (Mili 1943, 117–124). Blesh concluded his article by reminding readers of the symbolic importance of jazz. More than the music produced in Communist nations, jazz serves as a symbol of equality:

"Jazz is essentially the music of the masses. It is still easy to recognize its humble origins. The popular sources continue to renew inspiration. But jazz isn’t simply popular music, but rather music that truly belongs to the people. This is what gives it its creative value and its meaning."

(Blesh 1945)

Blesh was commissioned to write his brief history of jazz by a subdivision in the USIS called the Office of War Information (OWI), and as noted, his article appeared in Nuovo Mondo, an Italian-language news/photo magazine published by the US State Department. As the new Italian ambassador to Italy, Alexander Comstock Kirk, explained to a reporter in August 1945, the goal of publications like Nuovo Mondo was to “restore political circulation to a nation mummified by two decades of fascism.” That said, Kirk insisted “that a sharp line be drawn between areas of US and Italian responsibility.” This is why he was adamant that Nuovo Mondo be openly identified for what it was. “Since the paper is in fact US propaganda,” said Kirk, “it should be billed as such” (Busch 1945, 89). But not all publications funded by the USIS after the war were clearly labeled as propaganda. A case in point is Musica e Jazz, a jazz magazine launched in 1945 and still published today.

Although Musica e Jazz carried the logo of the PWB inside every issue during its first twenty-four months in press, most of the articles were not written by Americans. Instead, well-known figures in Italian jazz were supplied with information from American sources—generally various affiliates of the USIS. Because the US wanted to avoid engaging Italians who might be sympathetic to Communist causes, USIS initiatives generally worked with well-known “reformed” writers and musicians who had established their reputations in the 1930s and 1940s working under the protection of the Fascist party. Such was the case with Musica e Jazz.

Musica e Jazz was founded by Gian Carlo Testoni, who had been a prominent figure in Italian jazz since the 1930s. Testoni was the co-founder of the Circolo del Jazz Hot in Milan. He was also the co-author of Introduzione alla vera Musica di Jazz (1938), which he had dedicated to Vittorio Mussolini, who in addition to being the dictator’s oldest son was a well-known jazz critic (Celenza 2017, 105). Testoni joined forces with a young publisher and jazz fan named Arrigo Polillo, and with funds from the USIS, they launched Musica e Jazz and successfully completed the first stage in the US State Department’s development of jazz diplomacy during the Cold War (Celenza 2017, 178).

The extent of American influence on the rewriting of jazz history in Italy was revealed in the headline article penned by Testoni that appeared in the first issue. Titled “Un sogna che avvera” (A Dream Come True), it began by stating the central goals of the journal, which included building the public’s interest in and understanding of jazz. Testoni then explained that the intended readership was not limited to “specialists” or “a specific social or economic class,” but intended “for everyone.” With these necessities out of the way, Testoni then offered a retelling of the history of jazz in Italy through the lens of the Circolo del Jazz Hot in Milan. Like so many others after the war, Testoni revised history here, claiming that for many years “a journal” that was “focused on jazz” was nothing more than “an unattainable chimera” (Testoni 1945, 1). He even went so far as to claim that the new journal represented the freedom “to use the word jazz without any"
worry," even though the word jazz continued to be used throughout the war by the Fascist press (Celenza 2017, 174–175). The influence of the US State Department was especially noticeable in the final paragraph of the article. Here Testoni defined jazz as a purely American product, a symbol of Democracy (Testoni 1945, 15). Thus it should come as no surprise that the early issues of the journal featured articles about American musicians almost exclusively. In the December issue of the inaugural year, an article appeared titled “Caratteristiche e significato del Jazz” and attributed to Rudy [sic.] Blesh. Like the article that appeared in Nuovo Mondo, this essay concludes by declaring the political symbolism of jazz:

It is music of the people, warm, human, alive and free. It says to all people who will listen to its dancing accents: “We move towards tomorrow, wake up and begin living!” Apart from any question of musical form, this, in its broadest sense is the message and the vitality of American jazz.

(Blesh 1945b, 5)

With regard to Musica e Jazz, reading through the first dozen or so issues of the publication reveals that one of its primary purposes was to draw as many male readers as possible—even those who had little to no interest in jazz. Each cover featured a full-page photo of a scantily clad, young American singer or starlet, like Marion Hutton or Ginger Rogers. And the articles all made a subtle distinction between jazz, which was presented as a definitively American style of music, and musica leggera (light music), the popular music composed and performed by Italians.

In December 1946, changes in the USIS’s approach to propaganda led to the halt of the agency’s financial support of Musica e Jazz. The primary reason the State Department pulled funding was likely because recent studies completed by their operatives had revealed that radio was more efficient than print publications. With radio, a bigger audience could be reached with less investment of funds (more about this below). The sudden withdrawal of funding from Musica e Jazz caused a one-month pause in the magazine’s publication schedule. When the first issue of the “new” version finally appeared in January 1947, the look and content of the magazine had changed drastically. Gone were the cover girls designed to attract general readers and articles touting American Democracy. In their place were photographs of great jazz performers and articles highlighting collaborations between Italian and American musicians. Even the name of the magazine had changed. Musica e Jazz became Musica Jazz, and with the elimination of that one small word—e (and)—all references to Italian “light music” disappeared, leaving only discussions of “Jazz Music” for engaged aficionados.

The cover of the first issue of Musica Jazz carried a photo of Louis Armstrong, whose relationship with Italy dated all the way back to the 1930s (Celenza 2017, 104–108). In an article published in 1934 and titled “Cinque dischi hot” (Five Hot Discs), Vittorio Mussolini became one of the first to welcome officially the arrival of “hot” jazz on the Italian market:

Those who enjoy this species of jazz music will be glad to know that these five new discs contain all the elements that make the “hot” disc interesting: the rhythm, the perfect tightness of tempo, the singing—these elements are never abandoned on these recordings by the most famous orchestras.

(Mussolini, V. 1934, 10)

With regards to Armstrong specifically, Vittorio Mussolini’s admiration was quite outspoken for the time:

Which brings us to the most characteristic of hot orchestras, that of Louis Armstrong’s Negroes. For them, the “hot” [style] is a natural thing, and they had the rhythm in their
ears as soon as they were born. Thus, if one wanted to define the “hot” style, one could say that it is the fox[trot] arranged by Armstrong without fear of making mistakes. Louis plays the trumpet in a perfect manner. He alone has the capacity to achieve on it the specific timbres of the clarinet or violin. He sings in a funny accent that leads instinctively to laughter and is no less effective in “Georgia on My Mind” or “Lazy River.”

(Mussolini, V. 1934, 10).

Several months after this review appeared, Armstrong visited Italy for the first time and presented two concerts, on January 15 and 16, at the Teatro Chiarella in Turin. The concerts sold out almost instantly and were warmly received by those in attendance. As a reporter for La Stampa della Sera noted after the first concert: “Armstrong is great, and only those with an ignorant, preconceived aversion to his art could impede its diffusion” by refusing to participate as a member of its “most diverse public.” Turin embraced Armstrong for his exhilarating music and all that it represented, and Armstrong appeared equally enamored of the Italians. In a thank you letter mailed to his Italian sponsors, Armstrong raved about the warm greeting he received in Turin, where he had his “biggest success in all Europe” (Celenza 2017, 108). USIS officials no doubt knew about Armstrong’s successful visit to Italy in 1935. And his appearance on the cover of Musica Jazz twelve years later fueled the State Department’s plan to bring Armstrong back to Italy for a multi-city tour in 1949.

When Armstrong arrived in Milan on October 21 for the first leg of his twelve-day tour, he was greeted by Gorni Kramer, USIS officials, and an Italian film crew. In the newsreel released shortly thereafter, an enthusiastic Italian commentator describes the excitement around Armstrong’s arrival and the wide array of black jazz stars who have accompanied him:

From the American South heavenly drums greet the King of jazz, Louis Armstrong, as he arrives with his orchestra at Malpensa airport. Accompanied by his wife, he has traveled from Amsterdam. Here in Milan he will begin his concert tour of Italy. Wilma Middleton [arrives as well] with her nostalgic voice and a body that is sometimes as round as the panetone [cake] that is offered to the arriving guests. Our [Gorni] Kramer is on the airfield. And this is the bassist Arvell Shaw. This is the piano player Earl Hines. . . . [Armstrong] takes a look at the score composed by Kramer. Armstrong already has a fever in his muscles to play his trumpet and sing.

(“Arrivo in Italia di Louis Armstrong con la sua orchestra” 1949)

One member of Armstrong’s entourage, who is not mentioned by the newsreel commentator, is Slim Aarons, a famous fashion photographer who had spent the Second World War working as a combat photojournalist in Italy. The omission of Aarons from the newsreel is not surprising. By 1949, he was associated with the CIA, which had been founded in 1947. Aarons was sent to Italy on special assignment by Henry Luce, of TIME-LIFE, who served as an early facilitator of CIA operations. Luce was no doubt also the one who supplied the USIS with the Gjon Mili “Jam Session” photos used in 1945 for the inaugural issue of Nuovo Mondo. In an effort to offer Aarons cover, Luce set up a TIME-LIFE Bureau in Rome, which Aarons ostensibly directed. Aarons’s fame as a fashion photographer enabled him to get close to figures important to CIA operations. In addition to photographing every moment of Armstrong’s tour, Aarons traveled to Sicily in 1950 and spent several weeks tracking the movements of the deported Italian American gangster, Lucky Luciano.

Armstrong’s visit to Italy in 1949 spurred renewed interest in his music among Italian listeners, and the USIS took full advantage of this interest as they expanded their efforts in the realm of Italian radio.
US Involvement in Italian-Language Radio Broadcasts

Although broadcasting was briefly decentralized in Italy after Germany’s surrender, regular broadcasts reemerged within a few months as the stations in the North were incorporated into the new national broadcast system, Radio Audizioni Italiane (RAI), which facilitated the return of many former personnel (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 177). Consequently, many of the musicians who worked for EIAR and Cetra during Mussolini’s years returned to positions of prominence in the late 1940s.

By 1947, the USIS fully realized the useful role radio could play in fighting Communism in Italy, and as a study by International Public Opinion Research, Inc. revealed, the effectiveness of Voice of America broadcasts in Italy was largely due their broadcasts of American music, i.e., jazz:

A large part of the population—and presumably to some extent of the radio listening audience—is Communist, but neither Communists nor non-Communists would want to hear broadcasts which were weighted on the side of America in cold war. They cannot afford to. Instead their inclinations, almost wishful thinking, center on wanting to hear music.

Many Italians listen solely for pleasure to Voice of America. They naturally expect to hear about the United States, but they also expect free entertainment. No world problems are ever so pressing to an Italian that he would not like to have them presented as enjoyable as possible.

(NARA 1950, 76–77)

Given assessments like the above, it should come as no surprise that in the early 1950s, Italy became the most important target country in Western Europe for VOA broadcasts. This is shown not only in the shortwave broadcasts of VOA, but even more so in the radio programs prepared by VOA but broadcast surreptitiously on RAI. As a USIS directive in 1952 explained: “In all production for RAI, we prefer no VOA attribution if it can be avoided” (NARA 1952). With regards to jazz, the programs written by USIS officials but broadcast on RAI as “Italian” programming between 1950 and 1953 included: Vita musicale in America, La vetrina del jazz, and Punti e spunti americani di Renzo Renzi.

The Left Pushes Back

As the postwar years progressed, the inundation of American music facilitated by the USIS and CIA troubled many in Italy, most notably those cultural and political leaders aligned with the Communist Party. Consequently, an effort was made in the 1950s to reclaim the concept of a specifically Italian style of musica leggera that was disconnected from jazz. In 1951, the Festival della canzone italiana di Sanremo (San Remo Festival of the Italian Song) was founded. The mastermind of the contest was a musical director at RAI named Giulio Razzi (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 186). Publishers submitted a total of 250 songs, which were whittled down to twenty, which were then performed live by Italian musicians at the San Remo Casino so that listeners in the audience and at home could vote and select three winning songs. From the beginning, the festival drew substantial public involvement, and its popularity grew with each passing year. Most importantly, the San Remo Festival launched the careers of a new generation of Italian singers, and became the new propagandist for Italian popular song, creating melodies and lyrics that sold thousands of records and were repeatedly played on national radio (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 186).

In reaction to this new promotion of Italian popular music, Arrigo Polillo, one of the original editors of Musica e Jazz, and jazz critic Pino Maffei decided to produce a jazz festival in San
Remo alongside the successful singing competition. The Festival del Jazz di Sanremo (San Remo Jazz Festival) was designed in imitation of the Newport Jazz Festival, founded by George Wein in 1954 and broadcast in Italy over VOA beginning in 1955 (Wein 2018). The inaugural concerts took place on January 28 and 29, 1956. In a review of the festival published in Musica Jazz, Polillo commented on the festival’s success at attracting “the so-called general public” to performances of native Italians playing American jazz.

The press has talked about why, perhaps for the first time in Italy, jazz created and performed by Italians was brought in contact with the so-called general public. . . Alongside the aficionados, who arrived at San Remo in caravans or in groups, were seated the casual viewers, tourists passing through, and the patrons of the Casino’s gambling tables.

( Testoni 1956, 7)

To officials of the US Information Agency (USIA)—which had recently replaced the USIS—who witnessed the organization of the festival, the lineup of Italian bands, all of which claimed to specialize in the pre-Fascist era style of Dixieland jazz, must have seemed promising. Even Henry Luce’s photographers were there to capture picturesque scenes of the Italian spectators who formed a second line behind the Original Lambro Jazz Band as they marched through the streets of Milan on their way to the venue. Among the groups scheduled to play at the first San Remo Jazz Festival were: the Milan College Jazz Society, the Riverside Syncopaters Jazz Band, the Lucio Reale Quartet, the Basso-Valdambrini Quintet, a Sestetto Italiano and the Nunzio Rotondo Quintet. The pianist for this last group was listed as Romano Full. But much to the dismay of US officials, and the delight of the Italian spectators, Romano Full was none other than Romano Mussolini, the youngest son of Italy’s infamous Fascist leader. As a German reporter for Der Spiegel noted on February 8, the surprise appearance caused quite a stir:

Romano Mussolini, 28, Jazz-Pianist, youngest son of the former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, appeared as a member of a quintet under the pseudonym “Romano Full” at an international “Jazz-Festival” in the Italian Riviera spa resort San Remo. According to the Turin Gazzetta del Popolo, a deadly silence filled the concert hall when Romano Mussolini “with the broad and face burning eyes of his father sat down at the piano.” The public greeted the young Mussolini with stormy applause and later stood in line for autographs.

(Personalien 1956, 44)

The US reacted quickly to Romano Mussolini’s appearance at San Remo. Just this one performance threatened to wipe out more than a decade of jazz diplomacy in Italy. To the surprise of
many in the jazz world, the recording label RCA immediately offered Mussolini a multi-album contract featuring his performances of American Dixieland jazz. RCA had deep connections with the CIA during these years, and one cannot help but wonder if there was some government influence behind RCA’s sudden decision to offer Mussolini a lucrative record contract. Over the next decade, the young Mussolini was promoted in USA press reports as the rebellious son who defied his dictator father and chose the freedom of American jazz over Italian Fascism. Toward the end of his life, Romano Mussolini rejected such portrayals of his relationship with his father (Mussolini, R. 2004).

Romano Mussolini’s appearance at San Remo eventually led to greater USA influence on the programming of the Festival. Over the next eight years, the San Remo Festival grew more American in character. In 1957 Sidney Bechet and Dick Collins appeared on the program. In 1959 the Sonny Rollins Trio and Chet Baker were the featured performers. By 1960, Americans began to dominate—Roy Eldridge, Ella Fitzgerald, Shelly Manne Quintet, Bud Powell Trio, Kenny Clarke, and the Max Roach Quintet. Half the performers were American in 1962, and in 1963 all the performers were American except for one Austrian. There were no Italians. As *Billboard* magazine reported:

Out of 21 participants in the San Remo Jazz Festival, including the Jazz Messengers, the Cannonball Adderley combo and Ella Fitzgerald, 20 were American Negros, the exception being Adderley’s Austrian pianist, Joe Zawinul.

*(Billboard 1963, 73)*

George Wein was largely responsible for the booking of these American musicians, and because he was so efficient in his work, the State Department asked him to assist in other jazz initiatives. In 1958, he assembled an International Youth Band to perform at the Newport Jazz Festival. To do this, he traveled to Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. Wein covered the cost of finding the musicians and bringing them to the USA with $30,000 of surplus funds raised by the Newport Jazz Corporation, the non-profit entity that underwrote the Newport Festival. The State Department assisted with obtaining visas for the foreign musicians, and they organized and paid for additional performances by the International Youth Band at the World’s Fair in Brussels later that year (Wein 2018). It should come as no surprise that the musician representing Italy—drummer Gil Cuppini—had played on Radio Tevere during the war and was a member of Romano Mussolini’s trio. Over the next decade, the State Department continued to support tours, most notably those by “avant-garde African American jazz musicians,” organized by Wein under the auspices of the Newport Jazz Festival (Von Eschen 2004, 187–190). And in the 1970s, the State Department put Wein in charge of the Jazz Ambassadors program, which had been founded in 1956 by President Eisenhower and members of Congress, proving once and for all that jazz was indeed America’s “Secret Sonic Weapon.”

References


———. 1945b. “Caratteristiche e significato del Jazz.” *Jazz e Musica* (December).
The Birth of Jazz Diplomacy

Forgacs, David and Stephen Gundle. 2007. Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
———. 1952. RG 59, Central Decimal File, Class 511.65 4 Box 2570, “Foreign Service Despatch: Production for Italian Service” (March 14).