4-6-1958

Poland: San Francisco Chronicle, "'Mr. Coolu' Got a Warm Polish Reception"

Ralph J. Gleason
Mr. Coolu' Got a Warm Polish Reception

By Ralph J. Gleason

"WE SHOULD send more jazz groups to Poland, the Poles consider jazz an art; it means the free expression of the individual to them," said Iola Brubeck, wife of pianist Dave Brubeck.

Mrs. Brubeck returned last week from Europe where she accompanied her husband and his quartet on an extended tour. The high light of their tour was a series of sold-out concerts in Poland (Ray McKinley's large orchestra went there two years ago) and the first racial or mixed group ever to appear in that country.

During the two weeks, from March 6 to March 19, that the Brubeck group was in Poland, the quartet played concerts in small auditoriums on all but two nights, were feted by Polish jazz fans, acquired a small entourage of young jazz buffs who followed them from city to city and met many citizens of Poland who were avid jazz fans.

Brubeck's group was the first in-person experience the Poles have had with the so-called "cool" style of jazz and called Brubeck "Mr. Coolu.'"

"Jazz is a symbol of freedom to the Poles," said Darius Brubeck, one of the two Brubeck sons who went along on the trip. "Willa Conner who does the Voice of America jazz broadcasts is listened to all over Poland," Mrs. Brubeck said. "He is the best teacher of English that Poland has ever had, many people told me. We met jazz fans who had learned to speak English from listening to his broadcasts although English is also taught in the schools now."

Jazz is such a passion with the Poles that they have recently started a national jazz magazine. There are jazz clubs in all the leading cities, and Roman Wascho, a 30-year-old aficionado, has a weekly column on jazz in a Warsaw newspaper.

There are few jazz records available in Poland; most jazz fans learn about it from the Voice of America or by attending lectures given by Washco and illustrated with recordings loaned by the U.S. Cultural Attache in Warsaw. Black market copies of American jazz LP's sell for as much as $20, a staggering amount for a low-income Polish jazz fan to pay. Jazz in Poland was underground, Mrs. Brubeck reported, until after the Polish October Revolution and the emergence of the Gomulka government as quasi-independent. Prior to that time, no assembly of more than three people was allowed and Polish jazz fans and musicians had to meet illegally in cells to hear the music they liked, Mrs. Brubeck discovered.

At one time a few years ago a Polish official in the Cultural Ministry is reported to have said: "The Western Powers have three strong weapons—American jazz, American art, and Coca-Cola." Today, Mrs. Brubeck said, American movies are being shown in Poland, American jazz is being heard there (there is no censorship of radio broadcasts at all) and Coca-Cola has just made a deal with a Polish bottling company.

Although the Brubeck Quartet had enthusiastic receptions throughout Poland, perhaps the warmest response came in Sopot on the night of March 7. As an encore the Polish jazz critic, Roman Washco, introduced the two young Brubeck boys, Darius, 11, and Michael, 10, who then played a piano-and-drums version of Duke Ellington's "Take the A-Train."

"It was my first public appearance," said Darius who is named after his father's classical mentor, Darius Milhaud. "I was real nervous, I started to fumble around and my father yelled, "Play the melody!" So I played the melody. It didn't sound too bad, really, but when it came to the breaks Michael just looked at me—I wouldn't want to do it in this country, though," Darius said reflectively. "I would be kinda corny."

Some idea of the attraction jazz has for the Poles may be gained from the fact that Brubeck accepted a request to play a concert in Warsaw at the Palace of Culture on only 24 hours' notice, yet filled the hall. With no publicity except a few announcements on the radio, 3000 Polish jazz fans jammed the hall to hear the Brubeck group.

"Jazz means so much to them," Mrs. Brubeck said.

"They take it more seriously than we do. They think it definitely is an art and one with great significance. The audiences all seem to sense creativity, even more than here, and the fact that they continued their applause and jazz and play it even when it was forbidden shows how much it meant to them. It is a symbol of protest for the Poles."

Russian propaganda about Little Rock has not been completely effective, Mrs. Brubeck reported. The presence of President Dwight, the first Negro jazz musician to tour Poland, caused no comment at all. When Wright was introduced, he received the most applause, but there was no special questioning on Little Rock or race relations.

"The Poles, who have themselves been in slavery in the past, seem to understand this situation," Mrs. Brubeck said. And Brubeck, when he spoke on jazz at the concerts, drew tremendous applause for saying: "No dictatorship can tolerate jazz. It is the first sign of a return to freedom."

The two weeks the Brubecks spent in Poland were far and away the most exciting of their overseas trip, according to Mrs. Brubeck. "You have no idea what a tremendous experience it was. The people are very friendly to Americans. We traveled without any U.S. representatives, only Mrs. Brubeck as the railroad stations in small towns and cities people would crowd around us in a circle and sometimes even touch us for luck."

Jazz musicians in Poland are a breed of their own; they can play themselves, Mrs. Brubeck discovered. In fact, the Brubeck band played a special evening concert for the Brubecks so the visiting American jazz men could hear the Polish musicians. "They were very, very good." Mrs. Brubeck said.

The Polish sense of humor was another outstanding feature of the trip. Polish jazz musicians are sending a band to a jazz festival in Copen­ hagen this spring and the Polish jazz buffs say "Imagine! They are the first jazz group to go behind the Iron Curtain."

As a result of her experiences in Poland, Mrs. Brubeck is sending back books, records and American jazz magazine to the U.S. Cultural office. "The Poles are starved for all this, they pass jazz magazines around until they are in tatters."

When the Brubeck group left March 20 after a concert in Poznan, the station platform was crowded with jazz fans offering them flowers ("They were always flowers for us, all over") and small gifts and presents. The jazz buffs who had followed the group for two weeks were crying and," Mrs. Brubeck said, "so were we."

As the train left the Poznan station, Roman Washco, the jazz critic, ran the length of the platform waving goodbye.

"I don't know what I did to deserve this," Darry Brubeck said.

"It was quite an experience," his mother concluded.