



## ***DID SENATOR J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT LIKE JAZZ?***



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**I** don't know if Senator William Fulbright ever enjoyed listening to Jazz, but the program dubbed after him shares many of the features that make Jazz a universal American born artistic expression.

In 2011 I was awarded a Fulbright grant and immersed in a mix of anxiety and wonder I headed to Rochester, NY to pursue a doctoral degree at Eastman School of Music, one of the most prestigious music schools in the world, established by philanthropist George Eastman. Most will recognize Mr. Eastman, not from his love for music, but for founding the Eastman Kodak company and popularizing photography and motion pictures. Describing the impact Fulbright had in my personal and professional life is a profound examination of who I am today as an artist and a human being.

The Fulbright program's core philosophy aims at promoting peace through universal understanding. Scholars on academic exchange funded by the program



are expected to develop intercultural skills and act as cultural diplomats. After all, knowing each other better, we are more likely to empathize and refrain from biased dogmas. While in the United States I proudly embodied the Portuguese ethos and never lost an opportunity to promote the splendor of the country, the candor of the people and the scrumptious cuisine.

After coming back to Portugal and to this day I do my best to act conversely, promoting American values that were passed on to me and the natural beauty I was lucky enough to witness.

But that was only half of what the Fulbright experience was all about. From a professional standpoint, as a Jazz musician, artist and above all an aesthetic researcher, it is clear that I cannot live in a closed shell. Creativity is not self-nurturing and with so much potential for inspiration all around the world it would be irrational not to take advantage from all the natural and anthropological *stimuli*.

An enthusiastic and unprejudiced attitude towards a wide scope of influences yields endless creative raw material. In that sense the Fulbright program opened the door for me to come in contact with a very diverse group of colleagues sharing experiences and objectives similar to mine. Certainly, one can play music by him/herself, but collective experience of musical events is far more prolific and fulfilling. This is especially true in Jazz, because improvisation is a consistent act shared interactively by all members of the ensemble throughout performances. In doing so, everyone's musical discourse is simultaneously cause and effect of the playing of everyone else's. Additionally, amongst initiated musicians, Jazz is *lingua franca* and it's not uncommon to have artists from all over the world share extemporaneous creation without the need to prefatorily exchange a single word. During my program, attending jam sessions involving people from numerous



origins and cultures was a common event and, on one occasion, I had a thought that bordered epiphany. What I was witnessing was a perfect antithesis of the biblical metaphor of the Tower of Babel. On the spot, exhilaration of artistic creation faded all linguistic, cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Later, reminiscing on that episode I realized that music is not singular and other areas of human activity enjoy the same universal character. Mathematicians can also communicate nonverbally and scientific breakthrough, if not as spectacular, is certainly as moving as any stage performance. Although we are innately inclined or perhaps socially formatted to focus on what pushes us apart that which binds us is far more significant. During my life I came across numerous variations of this worn cliché and I thought I knew what it meant until I went through several experiences, among which a visit with friends from all over the globe to Martin Luther King's memorial, that really stressed its meaning. If we really embrace this state of interconnectedness it's inconceivable to be well while our kindred human beings are not, and consequently widespread peace and prosperity are but an inevitable outcome.

Today I know that my mission is to teach and use Jazz as a tool to bring people closer together and it seems poetic that Jazz was born and has been growing alongside emancipation. As a true American art form Jazz's accomplishment – possibly the only musical lineage that endured the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century – is not in small part due to its ability to embrace and combine musical idioms from all over the world and that is precisely the Fulbright program's ethos.