

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Information Series

WILLIS CONOVER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Origins of “Music U.S.A.” And How Conover
Got Started IN VOA

Evolution Of The Program Over The Years

Early Signs Indicating The Program Was Successful

Over The Years Conover Visits Several Countries
To Meet His Fans. First And Most Tumultuous
Stop: Warsaw, 1959

Some of Conover’s Experiences On His
Various Overseas Visits

Conover Discusses His Philosophy of Music,
Its Programming Methodology, And His Distaste
For What He Considers Distasteful Productions
That Pass For Music Today

Generally, Conover Has Had Strong Support
For His Program From Both Directors of VOA
And USIA. Cites Particularly John Chancellor

Some of Conover’s Special Programs, Particularly
With Duke Ellington; Ellington At The White
House And Numerous Other Times During Nixon,
Johnson, Carter Administrations

The Story of How The Irving Berlin Show Celebrating
Composer’s 70th Birthday, Was Put Together

And, The Update of The Program Celebrating His

100th Birthday

Conover's Determination To Remain Non-Political
On The Air

Conover's Assistance To Foreign Musicians of Merit

Conover Compliments His Engineers
With An Occasional Exception

A Tale Of Jealousy-Induced Low Blows

Back To Discussion Of Foreign Musicians:
Conover's Help To Polish Jazz Pianist
Adam Makowicz, The Outcome Of That
Assistance

A Chinese Woman Who Was Still in China
During The Cultural Revolution, Becomes
A Conover Fan As A Listener To VOA,
Later Becomes Mrs. Conover

INTERVIEW

Q: How did Music USA get started?

CONOVER: In 1954, when I was working in a Washington, DC area radio station, I just happened to overhear one announcer saying to another, "I hear the Voice of America is looking for someone to do a jazz program."

Q: And you were doing a jazz program.

CONOVER: In commercial radio I was doing all the stuff that had to be done – newscasts, commercials, and commercial music, plus – against the will of the sales department and the management – a jazz program, too. I thought, you mean they're looking for someone to do the kind of thing that I want to be doing – not because it's jazz but because there's more interesting music to be found in that category than in many other categories, certainly more interesting than in any so-called "top forty" group of popular music.

And so I got in touch with the deputy program manager of the Voice of America. That is, I called the Voice of America, and he was the one who got the call. His name was John Wiggin, and he said, "Please come by." Well, inside of the first 30 seconds of talk in his office, each of us was aware that the other person knew something about jazz. In fact,

John Wiggin was just about the only person at the Voice of America who really knew the jazz field – old, new, and in between. He, for example, had produced a network program by Woody Herman and his orchestra, sponsored by Wild Root. I used to hear that while I was in the army in World War Two. He had hired unknown studio musicians named Benny Goodman and Bix Beiderbecke. And he had recommended to a radio station where he was working some years before that they hire a singer he had heard, with big ears and a good voice, and when they refused he left the radio station and went to another radio station, and had them hire Bing Crosby.

He said to me, “I wish I had heard from you a week ago because we’ve already signed someone for 90 programs of Music USA, which is to be an hour a day of popular music preceding an hour a day of jazz, seven days a week.” He added that this other person was hired because his voice was in a range where the VOA director said a voice would be most likely to cut through the vagaries of short wave transmission and reception. “He doesn’t really like jazz that much.”

Q: That was Jack Poppele.

CONOVER: Jack Poppele was then the director. Then John added, “On the other hand, 90 programs – they don’t have to be consecutive. We could put him on Monday through Friday. Would you be willing to come in and do Saturday and Sunday? He can do his 90 programs that way.” I said, “Fine.” So I had a contract for two programs a week. The price was cut down considerably very shortly. I took quite a cut in my income to begin doing contract work at VOA, but it was the kind of work that I wanted to do, and it was worth the loss of income.

Meanwhile, I was asked by Dan Morley, who was the head of Worldwide English at the time, “Have you ever heard [the other Music USA broadcaster] doing his program? I’d like to know what you think of it.” Now, I had heard the announcer doing the program, and I didn’t think too much of what he was doing, simply because he did not like jazz. He had said he liked Louis Armstrong and that was all. Of course, I liked Louis Armstrong, but that wasn’t all. The man was an expert in sports. My feeling was, since I am not an expert in sports, that I would do a sports program about as well as he would do a jazz program, since my interest was not in sports and his was not in jazz. I didn’t feel right criticizing his work, so – one of the few lies I’ve told – I said, “No, I haven’t heard him,” in response to that question.

Well, a few months later, Dan Morley came to me and said, “The other announcer says he can’t work his full-time job at a network station and also do this many programs in a week, and he’s recommended that you do the Monday through Friday and he will do the Saturday and Sunday. It was either that or he said he is leaving, and so we’d like you to do the Monday through Friday and we’ll get another announcer to come in to do the Saturday and Sunday.” At this point, after my 35th year here of doing this, I’ve kind of forgotten the exact details. At which point I said, “Well, now I can tell you. I was not going to criticize somebody else’s work when you asked my opinion of his work, but he did not like jazz. And” – exactly what I said a minute ago – “he’s an expert in sports and

does a jazz program about the way I would do a sports program -- not well.”

So that’s the way the program got going. Originally it was aimed at the Soviet Union, because an American ambassador to the Soviet Union said there would be quite an audience for jazz in the Soviet Union. But VOA wanted to precede that hour of jazz a day with something a little bit – sort of a transition hour of popular music before getting into jazz. It was announced at that time that the program was aimed toward Scandinavia, which was enroute between here and the Soviet Union. But then we started getting letters from listeners even further, saying, “I’m on an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf, and why do I have to wait till two o’clock in the morning to hear this program of jazz?” Which is what time it was when it got over there in that area. And so they decided to make it worldwide.

Ask a simple question like “How did Music USA get started?” and you get a simple answer like that one.

Q: Did it stay an hour of pop and an hour of jazz for the next several years? I remember when we put Panorama USA right ahead of Music USA so we’d have a three-hour block to the Soviet Union, with a news-and-variety show and then the two music shows.

CONOVER: After a while it was decided by management that there should be news every hour on the hour, and the news-plus-commentary-plus features and so forth, and my program, instead of being two hours, would be 45 minutes and 45 minutes. I agreed with that completely.

Q: That was years later, wasn’t it?

CONOVER: Not too many years later. I forget how many, to tell the truth.

Q: Panorama began in November of 1955.

CONOVER: Anyway, my first programs got on the air in January of 1955, and later on the first part of Music USA – the non-jazz part – was cut down to three programs a week of half an hour each, and then to only two programs a week, Sunday and Monday, Music USA (Standards), half an hour each, and then Music USA (Jazz) – which I always announced as the Voice of America Jazz Hour – 45 minutes Monday through Saturday.

Q: That was the late sixties, wasn’t it?

CONOVER: Exactly when that came about I’m not entirely sure. I should add that currently, in addition to doing that, I do a program once a week for Poland, and I do seven programs a week on VOA Europe to all of Western Europe – 45 minutes a night. That’s called Willis Conover’s House of Sounds – the title borrowed from a story by M. P. Shiel.

Q: You used to do a program to the Soviet Union (for the Russian Service).

CONOVER: Yes, I was for quite a while doing a program directed to the Soviet Union with Marie Ciliberti.

Q: What years did you do that?

CONOVER: Marie could tell you exactly what years, I think. She had been an exhibit guide for a USIA exhibit in the Soviet Union, and she wrote a letter back here saying, "People keep coming up to me and asking about Willis Conover and I don't know anything about him. Who is he?" I saw the letter. When she came back she came in to see me and said, "I'm almost afraid to say hello to you, I heard about you from so many people." Well, we became good friends, and we are good friends today. And for a while, the better part of a decade, as I recall, she and I did an hour a week to the Soviet Union. She got someone to translate my part and read it in Russian, and she did her part in Russian, added in the studio.

Q: Is that the way the Polish program is handled today?

CONOVER: Actually, the program that I do to Poland today is done somewhat differently. I do the program in the studio, in English, and with music, onto tape. The tape is given to Renata Lipinska – that's her broadcast name. She edits the tape and makes a script, which transcribes that part of what I say that has been kept on the tape, and also puts what she is going to say in Polish onto the script, and it goes back and forth the next day. I am in the control room with the engineer, she is here in the studio, and we each have a copy of the script, and we go back and forth between me (and the music) on tape and her on microphone onto still another tape, and that is what is broadcast. It's just a slightly different way of doing it.

Q: Back to the fifties. What were the early signs of success for the program, aside from Marie finding somebody who asked about you at an exhibit?

CONOVER: Well, the early signs of success were letters from a number of different parts of the world, including the Soviet Union – not as many as there were listeners because it wasn't that easy for people to write to someone at the Voice of America in Washington from anywhere in the Soviet Union. Then there were also articles appearing in newspapers in other countries about the program.

And I must say that when it was decided that I should go to meet my listeners in a number of different countries, I got my itinerary and announced on tape, on programs to be broadcast while I was traveling, where I was that day, where I would be the next day, and where I'd be going the next day, and so forth. The most unforgettable experience of that first trip, in 1959, was my arrival at the airport in Warsaw, Poland. Looking out the window of the plane when we landed, I saw at the foot of the ramp some people with cameras, people with tape recorders, some little girls carrying flowers, and a big crowd behind the airport fence. I thought, Well, I'd better wait till whoever that's for gets off, and I was the last person off the plane. And that's when the cheering started from behind

the fence. It was for me. They had heard me say on my program that that was when I was going to arrive.

I was met at the ramp and handed the flowers, official Polish flowers, picture taken, tape recorder, Radio Warsaw welcoming you to Poland, etc., and a representative of the United States Information Agency, who was in the American embassy there, also met me. We came out of the terminal, all these people surrounding me, and a band started playing, 20 or 30 musicians. We got into the embassy car, driving into town, and people were bicycling and motorcycling alongside the car and waving at me inside, and I said to the USIA representative, "What is going on here?" He said, "Tonight and tomorrow night musicians are coming from all over Poland, at their own expense, to perform for you at the National Philharmonic Hall, to show you what they've learned from your broadcasts."

This was incredible. I was introduced from the stage – I was sitting in the front row with a bunch of people – the place was absolutely packed – introduced from the stage, and the applause went on so long I rose to acknowledge the applause but it went on even after I'd sat down, so long that I finally had to get up on stage and say something myself. And I did, winding up with something I had memorized – as I always try to memorize a few basic

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Denmark, Greece, Turkey, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, India, Argentina, Brazil, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Soviet Union. I've been there [the Soviet Union] three times – 1967; again in 1969, when the White House asked me to join the American delegation to the Moscow International Film Festival; and then again in the early 1980's when Ambassador Hartmann asked me to come over to introduce Chick Corea and Gary Burton in concerts in the American consulate in Leningrad and in the embassy in Moscow as well as at the Union of Soviet Composers in Moscow. Nineteen times in Poland. The last time to go there was 1987.

Nine times in Hungary – certainly by way of Budapest each time, but the festivals are most often in a town, as I recall, 120 miles east of Budapest, a town called Debrecen. Numerous times in Yugoslavia, where I was met in every town, every city: Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Novi Sad, Bled, and Dubrovnik.

Q: Are these purely musical experiences, or do people talk about all kinds of things?

CONOVER: Music is the basis of most of the trips. Of course, you develop friendships and old friends talk about all kinds of things. I have learned a lot from those trips. One of the first and most basic things is, in certain parts of the world, never talk in your hotel room – not in a tourist hotel – because there are too many people listening. Not that what I would have to say would be any thing improper, but sometimes you can get people in trouble just by mentioning their names.

Another thing I learned is to appreciate, as too few Americans do, how lucky we are that

our ancestors came here so we could be born here. Most Americans do not realize how lucky we are. Yes, there are many things wrong in the USA. In every country there are things wrong, but our system makes it possible for us to change what is wrong. I know that my first time in London I was charmed by it. I established some good friendships with people like Johnny Dankworth and his wife, Cleo Laine, among others. And I remember thinking, I'd like to spend six months here. But if I did, I thought, I'd never be able to get back into the American tempo of things. That was when I was staying at the Gore Hotel in Queens Gate, Kensington, London, where friends would join me to eat in the dining room there and talk, and afterwards in the adjoining hotel bar or pub. I remember how courteous the taxi drivers were then. I add the word "then" because I've run into some discourteous ones since then. I remember fumbling around for some additional change to pay the cab fare and have the cab driver say, "That's all right, sir; that'll be enough." (Laughter) That's rare.

Since I've mentioned some changes in that, I remember one time when I was traveling to various places by way of Heathrow instead of Frankfurt, I wanted to go to an airport hotel to get some sleep before going on further. Most airport hotels have busses that pick up people who are registered in the hotels, and this hotel's bus was very much delayed and I was falling over after a long trip. There was a terribly long line to check through immigration or whatever it was, where they check your papers when you go into town. I was in that line for over an hour. I think the people doing that job had taken a tea break or something. So after waiting for a bus for a half hour, I went to a taxi driver and asked if he'd take me to the airport hotel – five minutes away by taxi or bus, but to walk it would be a good half hour, carrying luggage. And I wasn't sure how to get there, either. He refused to take me; he wanted a ride to go into the city, which would cost enough to make it worth his while. I kept insisting, but he turned his back on me and said to another cab driver, "As you was sayin'..." I was so burned up about that, the next day I called the Ministry of Tourism, and he said, "If I were you, sir, I would write a letter about this to the Times." I said, "The New York or the London Times?" And he said, "Both." He agreed with me that I'd been treated very badly. But that's the only such experience I've had in London, of the half-dozen times I've been there.

Q: Are there always concerts during these visits that you have overseas?

CONOVER: Almost always. It depends on which country. There are festivals in many different countries. There are concerts. And when there are not, there are clubs and places where musicians are performing. I also have toured to lecture at USIS posts at the American embassies.

I recall, for example, I was on the jazz advisory panel for the U.S. State Department cultural presentations, and I was going to emcee the first jazz festival in Bombay. I had been told that I would be flown first-class, and there would be a vacation in addition, and so forth. The Americans at this jazz festival at Bombay had to be supported by State Department funds. I was on the panel to consider those who were applying, and I finally said to the State Department representative, "Look, I cannot be in a position of voting money to people who'll perform at a festival where I'm being flown in first-class and

being put up in first-class hotel accommodations, and all that sort of thing, even though I'm not getting paid; I just think it's a conflict of interest." He said, "I think you're right. I think you should travel for USIA. Let them send you over. We'll have to set you up to do lectures not only in Bombay but in New Delhi and Madras and Calcutta, and we'll want to send you down to Colombo, Sri Lanka, as well." So I gave the lectures.

In Colombo, the cultural affairs officer, the CAO, had a dinner for me the evening before I was to speak at the USIS auditorium, and said, "Arthur C. Clarke apologized that he can't be here tonight. He's being visited by a friend from overseas, but he asked that you call him." So I called Arthur, and he said, "Willis, I'm sorry I can't be there tonight. Come by my place tomorrow. They have my address." I said, "Arthur, I'm set up for interviews tomorrow, in addition to the lecture," and he said, "Well, have them come out and interview you here." I said, "It's television and radio stations, so I have to be there – and newspapers." I did manage to fit in my interviews – television, radio, newspapers, etc. – and a visit to Arthur Clarke's estate in Colombo, before the lecture.

Q: You had known him before.

CONOVER: Oh, yes, I had known Arthur Clarke. We grew up as science fiction fans in the 1930's; he's a little older than I am. He had been an official in the British Interplanetary Society, as a science fiction fan. I was editing a little magazine at that time, getting outstanding contributors for it. I knew him from some of the science fiction conventions in New York. In addition, he was a friend of Fred Durant – Frederick C. Durant III – who was then supervisor of or manager for space of the National Air and Space Museum. Durant and his wife had listened to me when I was on Washington radio and liked my music, and Fred Durant called me and said, "Arthur C. Clarke is coming here and we're giving a party for him and Arthur said be sure to invite Willis Conover." So I went there for that.

When I got to Arthur's place in Colombo, he was wearing a sarong. It was his home, after all, comfortable. I said, "Arthur, you can't come to a lecture at the USIS auditorium dressed like that." He said, "You don't expect me to come listen to you talk about jazz, do you?" I said, "Yes, go change." So he got into a suit. We sat around and talked for a while. He had the only television set in Sri Lanka, with a dish antenna outside, that the government of India had given him. It was a marvelous big estate. I don't know how many servants he had. I asked him, and he said, "I'm not sure – 15, 20."

We were in his writing room or office, and he had three libraries. One was just a general library; another was a library of his books, in all the languages they were published in; and the third was first editions of other writers' books inscribed to him, including a copy that I had inscribed to him of my book, Lovecraft at Last, about my correspondence with the late H. P. Lovecraft, in my teens, which I had given to Arthur at Fred Durant's home several years before. I had to go to the washroom, and he said, "In there. Be sure to read the sign on the door before you go in." I said, "All right." It was the sign from the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, on the lavatory there, saying, "Be careful in using the urinal here. Keep in mind that there's no gravity." (Laughter)

He came to the lecture, and I had music, too, on tape, and at the end of the lecture an hour later, he came to me and said, “This reminds me of what I’ve heard all my life: that can’t be science fiction; it’s good!” Meaning: That can’t be jazz you were playing; it was good music. (Laughter) Ever since then he says he listens to my programs and likes my music. So that’s helpful. I had seen 2001: A Space Odyssey twice – once at a big-screen theater in Washington, and once in the Kremlin during American Night for the Moscow International Film Festival when I was a part of the American delegation. That was quite an experience.

Q: Tell me about some of the other trips – the Debrecen festival, for example.

CONOVER: Debrecen is about 80 miles from the Soviet border and 120 miles east of Budapest, which is one of the most beautiful cities in the world – at least the Buda side is. You stand on the Pest side of the Danube and you see Buda and the big beautiful mountain on the other side. On the other hand, standing on the Buda side and looking across the Danube at Pest, you see the Hungarian Parliament building, which is one of the most beautiful buildings in Europe, too.

It’s a long, flat drive from Budapest to Debrecen. There’s only one hotel in Debrecen, the Aranybika, which means Golden Bull, and they say it’s older than America because it’s on the premises of what was a lodging place, literally, before the American Revolution began. That’s just a two-block walk from the Debrecen Cultural Center, where the festivals are held annually. I haven’t been for several years, but I do hope to go again. It’s also interesting, the marvelous food and drink you can get in Hungary – enroute or when you get there. And the people are friendly.

But I run into friendly people everywhere. I run into very few unfriendly people on my trips. I learned from such trips into certain areas how to recognize more quickly the kind of people in our country who would be like certain people in those countries if our system made it possible. And I am happy to say that over the years the great majority of the people, both here at the Voice of America and at USIA, have been friendly to me and have supported what I do. There are those who smile to the face and stab in the back in every organization and every country. And they are worse than the people who are vicious to your face and stab you in the back, because those people you recognize because of the way they treat you to your face, unlike those people who pretend to be friendly and then stab you in the back. But I feel they’re inferior people and resent anyone doing what the person is supposed to do and doing it well and having it recognized as such, because it makes them feel that they’re not doing as well, and so naturally they resent it.

Q: In that connection, tell me about some of the threats that have been made against Music USA through the years.

CONOVER: I don’t want to detail the threats against Music USA over the years. As I say, they’re very much in the minority, or a low ratio. I do recall one person who, a

number of years ago, came back from Poland and reported, “There’s no interest in music in Poland.” (Laughter) I thought, Good Lord Almighty, are you kidding?! Marvelous musicians, in Poland and from Poland.

Q: Reported that to the management of VOA?

CONOVER: That’s right. He was a policy officer at the time, later became program manager. No names. He was the one who came to me and said, “Are you playing – ?” I forget his name, but some cheap performer that would insult my listeners. When I said, “No,” he said, “Well, my 17-year-old daughter likes him!” I said, “Well, bring her in and I’ll educate her, too. My listeners have learned to appreciate the better music.” So some people confuse – since they don’t listen to my program, or if they do, don’t understand what it’s about or don’t understand its content – confuse the music I play with the cheap, broadly appealing, shallow sounds that grow most popular and certainly make more money. I aim for a relatively narrower, deeper and taller audience.

Q: I remember vividly when a news-oriented official proposed that you change the Music USA format completely – which in my view would have destroyed the program and its effectiveness.

CONOVER: It was proposed by someone in the upper level of VOA that Music USA be a talk program about music rather than a music program. I have felt that Music USA is a composition, a composed program, on a different scale from the composition of a symphony. Maybe a better parallel would be a menu. You know what the dessert is going to be, you know what the main course is going to be, and you find other things that go well with it. Well, having done some composing, there still is something like composition in the construction of a program. But within that program, or within a series of programs, I sometimes feel that the music should be constructed in a certain sequence, with a theme with variations and a climax and possibly a post-climax, like the movements of a symphony or a suite, with just enough commentary – or just remarks – to identify the performers and what they played, what they performed, who wrote it, that kind of thing, when it was done. At other times, to talk about some aspect of the music, and select the music to illustrate what I’m talking about.

So certainly there are different ways to approach it, and I try to incorporate different ways of constructing the program: talk, with music to illustrate the points in the talk, or music, with talk to identify the elements of the music. But some people feel that it must be entirely this or it must be entirely that. I’m sorry, but I’m a non-Aristotelian person. I don’t feel that a thing is either this or that; it can be a combination of the two. If I put my hand in front of my face, is my hand up or is it down? They’re the opposite of each other, so it’s got to be one or the other. Right? No. From the floor, it’s up; from the ceiling, down – at the same time. And the same is true in the construction of a music program.

Now I do try to follow my esthetic standards as well as my ethical standards. Not everyone is going to agree with my taste. On the other hand, I believe I must go according to, not just what I want to hear but what I feel should be done with the areas of

music that I find most interesting. So the so-called Top 40 list, particularly when I see the covers of some of the albums, with the people sneering at the camera, and the names of the groups, and the names of some of the things they perform – and occasionally I am subjected to hearing what they -- I think I made the right choice. I want to put a sign on the door some time saying – I won't name the performers – saying, Fans of the following not admitted. Signed: the Grateful Dead. (Laughter) It's not music as far as I'm concerned.

Now I know there's an audience for music that does not interest me, and I think the music should be broadcast for that audience, but certainly it's not what I want to broadcast. I don't want to spend my life being subjected to sounds that bore me or offend me. I have a broader taste than that might suggest, but it doesn't incorporate the shallow or the overtly and wantonly ugly.

Q: As a matter of fact, you have been lucky ever since John Wiggin in having the program leadership of the Voice of America understand and sympathize with that point of view – most of the time.

CONOVER: Most of the time, I've had understanding and support. I'm not going to go back year by year. I will say that, right now, as we speak, the Director of VOA and the Director of USIA speak strongly in support of what I'm doing. Naturally, I'm glad. In between now and the time when I first came here, there were a number of people who have given me strong support, or given strong support to what I'm doing. I will speak of only one because of the way certain things developed.

The famous television newscaster and commentator John Chancellor had been with NBC in Moscow for several years. I had heard him on radio, broadcasting from Moscow. Then when he returned, he did the morning television program on NBC network television. I happened to be watching him one morning when Chancellor interviewed some people who had just returned from the Soviet Union. He said to them, "Did you hear Willis Conover while you were there?" And I jumped nearly out of my skin. Naturally, that was flattering; I didn't know that he had listened to me. I never forgot that, and another time I'm watching television and President Lyndon B. Johnson is announcing: "And the next director of the Voice of America will be John Chancellor." I thought, Oh, my Lord, how wonderful! I don't have to spend time explaining why I'm broadcasting that kind of thing instead of the Top 40 crap. So I sent Chancellor a wire in care of NBC New York: Congratulations to all of us. Signed, Willis Conover. When he came here he told me that when he got the wire he called out to his wife, "Darling, we're in! I just got a wire from Willis Conover." Well, it was wonderful not to have to explain why I program what I program instead of following the Top 40 charts, which to me is an inversion – most of the time.

In any case, one time when I was working fulltime at CBS in New York and fulltime at VOA in Washington – one helluva commute, especially on snowy days – John said, "Willis, isn't it a lot of trouble carrying records down here from New York to do your programs?" I said, "Well, yes, it's a lot of work." He said, "Look, you get yourself an

engineer you like and I'll transfer him to New York and arrange for you to do your programs in the New York studios." I said, "John, thank you, but let me ask you something. When you were in Moscow for NBC, did you ever find yourself wondering if you were still with NBC?" He said, "I get it. I get it. Forget I asked you."

You've got to be on the premises, to smell the smoke before it turns into a fire. Because somebody could come in here and say, "What's this? Who? No, no. Cancel." It could happen. There have been people here who have taken that attitude. Very few. A very small minority. But there have been a few. Whether they literally disapproved of what I was doing – I don't know whether it was that or whether they resented my receiving approval and positive attention for a degree of success in what I was doing. That could happen, too. After all, people are human beings, and people can be jealous.

Q: Speaking of jealousy, there has been a certain amount of jealousy or resentment among some of the VOA staff through the years that you have never been an employee or member of the staff, that you've been an independent contractor. What do you say to people like that?

CONOVER: It is perfectly true that as an independent contractor I am occasionally resented by some people who are on staff, including people in supervisory positions, because I am not on their staff. How do I feel about that? I feel glad that I can go according to, as I said before, my esthetic as well as my ethical standards, rather than follow the often conflicting directions of succeeding supervisors. But I don't feel resentful that I don't have annual leave – I hear the word "vacation"; what does that mean? Or in the hallway: "What's he doing here on a holiday?" There are still just as many programs to do, and radio stations do not turn off on weekends or holidays. I also do not have money contributed by the government into my retirement fund. I have no retirement benefits from the government. And every year I have to go through the business of renegotiating the contract. So the only security I have is my continuing to do what I regard as the best I can do, and hope that enough people recognize that that's what I'm trying to do and feel that I'm succeeding in doing it enough of the time to have the contract renewed.

Q: You talked about maintaining the standards, ethical and esthetic, but has the program, musically, through the years changed because of the changes in jazz itself, for example?

CONOVER: Changes from minute to minute, from day to day, and from year to year, of course. But I never say, "Well, we've got to do something entirely different now." I may say, "Hey, maybe we should do a series on traditional jazz again, or maybe we should examine some of the so-called fusion music." Fusion is the word that is used to describe the outcome of the fusing of elements of jazz with elements of rock. And I can't blame a jazz musician for saying, "I've got to make some money, too." But that doesn't mean that I must therefore like the product of that decision, because I don't like what I hear in fusion or in rock. So I'm not going to do that just to do something different. As an artist continues, an artist grows, and growth is change, and that growth and that change is exhibited in the artist's work, and so the work grows and changes. And so what I use in

my program grows and changes.

Q: Give me an illustration of an artist. Miles Davis, for example?

CONOVER: All right. Miles Davis is exceptionally popular. Miles Davis was part of the Bop movement, who recognized that he would have difficulty competing with, or matching the virtuosity of, Dizzy Gillespie or Charlie Parker or other people of that sort. Despite that, I did bring Miles Davis to Washington, DC – I think it was the first time he played here – when I was doing Saturday midnight concerts on the stage of the Howard Theater in Washington, the Howard Theater being the quote black theater close quote in Washington – not the only one, but the principal one – during the evil time of segregation in Washington. I did my concerts there so that people would not be excluded, so audiences could come, not to mention performers.

I remember, just for example – then I'll get back to Miles Davis and your question – one time when I was on local radio station WWDC for several years in Washington, I was doing a broadcast, my mid-morning program from outside the Capitol Theater on F Street NW, which had movies and vaudeville, and an official at the Capitol Theater named Carter Barron was out there and we were talking and I said, "You know, you've got vaudeville shows here. Why don't you have people like the King Cole Trio and Pearl Bailey?" He said, "Because then all the niggers would want to come in." I thought, Good God! I thought it marvelous that the Carter Barron Amphitheater was named after him, and that's where more black performers appear in Washington than almost anywhere else.

When Woody Herman and his Orchestra played at the Capitol Theater he had a man on trumpet, Ernie Royal, who was doubling the lead, a black trumpeter, and he had to be replaced. They couldn't perform that way at the Capitol in the 40's and 50's. Because Dave Brubeck and George Shearing each had a black in his group, they couldn't perform at the Capitol; they had to perform at the Howard Theater. This was ridiculous, but in order to see to it that no one was excluded, I presented most of my concerts Saturday midnight at the Howard Theater. I brought in Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker, Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins and Buddy Rich and Stan Getz and so forth. And Miles Davis was among those performers.

I liked his early quintets and sextets, Bill Evans at the piano and Cannonball Adderley. The early Miles Davis groups, when he began to hit – John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley – this was good stuff. And the beautiful music that he did with the big bands he organized and conducted, and the music arranged by Gil Evans not related to Bill Evans – Sketches of Spain and Porgy and Bess and others. But in recent years Miles has made more money playing fusion, and I don't care how popular he is, and I have no objections to anyone playing whatever he feels he should play – even though Miles grew up in a fairly well-to-do family – his father was a dentist. As far as I'm concerned he has done some beautiful things, but I don't find much beauty in most of the things he is doing currently, or ever since what he called Bitches' Brew.

I had an assistant one time – back when I had a staff of two or three in the office, supplied to handle the office work – the youngest member of that staff asked me why I was calling the album Witches' Brew. I said, "Suppose I played a record or recorded something called, Let's Do It in the Middle of the Road, do you think I should be playing that and give the title?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "Even if it cost you your job?" "Oh, well, that's different." I said, "Well, that's what I'm saying. So I didn't call it Bitches' Brew."

In any case, he knows what he's doing. He wants to make more money. He's doing it. But I find other people more interesting.

Q: So you're playing less Miles Davis?

CONOVER: Yes. I don't play anybody because it's that person.

Q: No. I realize that. It's because of the fusion change.

CONOVER: Yes. Because I don't like the results of it. I don't like what I hear. There were a few things Duke Ellington did that I didn't like and I told him so. But he and I were friends – no problem. I didn't like everything Louis Armstrong did. Well, not everything that any performer has done is perfect.

Q: Speaking of Duke Ellington, tell me about some of the special shows you've done, like illustrated interviews.

CONOVER: Duke Ellington I've interviewed a number of times. A man named Jack Towers – an outstanding engineer in Washington who is often given master tapes of records and asked to improve them before they come out as records – had recorded Duke Ellington and his orchestra in Fargo, North Dakota, back in 1940. In about 1960, he was listening to my program in town, and he also knew I was broadcasting here, and he came by with the results – a scratched-up transcription kind of thing – and I recorded it and made programs out of it. It was rare stuff; it was the first night that Ray Nance was in the band. In, as I recall, 1965, I had Duke come by and I played it for him and recorded his comments. He had not heard that performance in 25 years, and so his comments were interesting. Sometimes I played them for him and then we recorded his comments before laying in the music, so it sounded as though he was introducing the music, not back then but as if he did remember the performance.

Early in the 1980's I was doing a series called Jazz at the Smithsonian, and Jack Towers happened to be backstage, and his Ellington at Fargo had been picked up by, I think, Reader's Digest, and very much cleaned up, and came out as a set of five or six LP's, and won the Grammy Award as the outstanding jazz album of the year. I congratulated him, and said, "Jack, I don't have the rest of the performances, just the ones you gave me, and of course they're not all straightened out." He said, "Well, I've made further improvements in the tapes I made from those disks, including some things that they did not put in the album because they're not complete. I'll bring those up to you." And he

did. And that was good because the first thing I had played was a sort of half a performance when they had changed the mike and changed the set-up on the original recording of The Sidewalks of New York, and Duke had commented on that, among other things. So I put in the corrected tapes, with Ellington commenting on what he had heard – Ellington in 1965 commenting on 1981 tapes of his 1940 performances. It was quite an interesting program. I also did a number of other interviews with Duke.

The thing I'm proudest of is having done a number of programs at the White House, beginning in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, including some programs with Ellington. I was able to persuade the White House during the Nixon administration that Duke Ellington, whose picture had been on the stamps of three different countries, should be saluted by his own country. It was approved, and I was told to get the all-star band together, and to rehearse the program and act as emcee at the White House on Ellington's 70th birthday, April 29, 1969. I made it plain that Duke was very sensitive about his age, and that it should not be spoken of as his 70th birthday. That would interfere with his adventures with the chicks he knew in every town. As Duke had told me one time, "People ask me, 'Hey Duke, when are you going to retire?' I said, 'Retire? Retire to what? As soon as I write a piece of music I've got an orchestra that I can hear playing it. I travel; it costs me nothing to travel. I have chicks in every town. What do I want to retire for?'" So I said, "Don't announce his age."

I was told by Leonard Garment, a professional musician as well as lawyer, who had put himself through law school playing saxophone with the Woody Herman orchestra and was now in the Nixon White House, that he had to approve of each musician that I was able to get for the concert. This, incidentally, was after I succeeded in telling them that we cannot limit this program to 30 minutes; it's got to be at least an hour. And that was approved. So I called Leonard and said, "Len, I've got Jim Hall on guitar." He said, "You got Jim Hall?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Oh, that's wonderful!" Then I called and said, "Len, I've got Gerry Mulligan on baritone sax." He said, "Gerry Mulligan?" I said, "Absolutely." And I said, "Listen, Len, you know, it's very difficult for me to call people and ask them are they willing to come here and perform free as long as they're approved of by you." He said, "You're right. Forget it. You go ahead and get the band together."

So – Jim Hall; Hank Jones at the piano; Milt Hinton on bass; Louie Bellson at the drums; Gerry Mulligan, baritone sax; Paul Desmond, alto sax; J.J. Johnson and Urbie Green, trombones; Clark Terry and Bill Berry, trumpets; Mary Mayo and Joe Williams, vocals; and three guest pianists: Billy Taylor, Dave Brubeck and Earl "Fatha" Hines. We rehearsed it that afternoon in the East Room, and Duke had unfortunately kept listing additional people he wanted to have invited, and his sister, Ruth, was calling me and saying, "We've got another ten people." I finally said, "Look, you've got six times as many people on this list as the place will hold. Please tell Edward, Ruth, that he is not giving this party. The President is, and maybe he has some people he'd like to invite, too." So that was sort of a little problem.

Anyway, I recall, at the end of the rehearsal that afternoon, I had to rush back to my pad and get in my dinner jacket and get back in time for the dinner. The dinner had the most

star-studded guest list they have ever had – literally. I’ve been told that over and over again, beginning that evening. The butlers were always saying, “Good evening, Mr. Conover. How nice to see you again in the White House,” and so forth. Then, “Hey, Willis man, this is the craziest thing I’ve ever seen, no shit!” (Laughter) Wonderful!

Anyway, I called out the musicians and said, “Look, hey, I’m not giving anybody’s name tonight during the concert. I’m going to talk about Duke and his music. Your names are on the White House program. But at the end of the concert, when you’ve gone off, come back and line up and I’ll name you one at a time, by horn and by name.” And at the beginning of the concert, President Nixon got up and said, “In looking at the outstanding program selected for this evening, I noticed that one selection is missing. Now, Duke Ellington is ageless” – he remembered what I had said about not mentioning Duke’s age – “but today is his birthday” – and people started to laugh – “so will you all please stand now and sing, Happy Birthday – and please, in the key of G.” And Nixon went to the piano and played Happy Birthday and everybody sang. Then he stepped forward and said, “And now, on with the show. Our master of ceremonies – Willis Conover.” And I stepped forward.

We were taping it, too. I got a professional recording engineer and recorded it not only for VOA but also for the White House. And also it could be issued by a record company with proceeds to go to an Ellington scholarship at Juilliard or something of that sort. And also to oversee the PA (public address) system within the East Room.

Q: You did broadcast it.

CONOVER: Oh, we sure did broadcast it. And I’d been trying to get permission for a jam session afterwards, because there was a Marine band there inside the north portico, and there were the Air Force Strolling Strings at dinner, wandering around playing Ellington music, and there were the musicians that I had to play Ellington’s music during the concert in the East Room, but there were also a lot of musicians in the audience, too. I said, “You know, they’d like to have a jam session afterwards.” I couldn’t get approval on that.

Well, at the end of the program, Nixon presented the Medal of Freedom to Duke, the highest civilian award, and as I had told Duke, “Be prepared to play something that you’ve never played before, if you should be called on to get up and play, too, and give it a name like Pat – for Patricia Nixon.” And he had something, and that was passed on, and President Nixon said, “Perhaps we should have Duke Ellington up to play something, too.” And Duke said, “I’d like to play something I’ve never played before, and I’ll give it the name of something that’s gentle and sweet, something like – Pat. And he went to the piano and played it. Then the musicians were lined up and I named them all.

Duke sat with his sister, Ruth, and President Nixon sat next to Patricia Nixon in the front row. One of the musicians said, loud enough for them to hear, “We thought you were going to have your picture taken with us.” He said, “Oh, yes,” and they got up again and everybody came forward in three rows, and I got over there in the middle, too, at the end

of which – since everything had to be planned in advance – Nixon turned around and said, “What do we do now?” And I said, “Well, Mr. President, if you’ll ask everyone to go out into the passageway inside the north portico, we’ll have all the chairs removed and we’ll have a jam session.” (Laughter) So he turned around and said, “The night is young. Mr. Conover says if you’ll all move into the next room we’ll have these chairs removed and we’ll have a jam session.” Yeaaaaa!! So that went on till about 20 minutes to three in the morning, and it was just incredible.

Benny Goodman was there; he didn’t have his clarinet. Dizzy was there; he had his trumpet; he sat in. Leonard (Garment) sat in. And Willie the Lion Smith and a bunch of other people. Anyway, it was quite an event. I put the last musician – Paul Desmond – in a White House limousine to take him back to his hotel room. Louie Bellson flew in from the coast, brought his own drums. He did ask me to rent for him a set of tuned tom-toms for his arrangement of Caravan, so I got that approved and got that, too. It was really a remarkable event. As I said, the guest list was the most star-studded – I won’t even begin to name them. I have a copy of it here. Every other name is a major star.

Q: You’ve hosted these White House affairs ever since the Lyndon Johnson administration.

CONOVER: Yes. I got a call one night. I was in the studio – my good studio here, Studio 16 – and someone came in from master control and said, “Willis, there’s a call for you from the White House.” I went in there, and it was Bess Abell, social secretary to Lady Bird Johnson, Mrs. LBJ. She said, “This is Bess Abell, Mr. Conover. Barbara Bolling tells me you are the proper person to write out for us an introduction that Lady Bird Johnson can give to the Dave Brubeck Quartet, who are performing tonight for King Hussein of Jordan.” She said, “If you can keep it to one minute.” I said, “Fine, give me ten minutes to write it. Can I call you back?” She said, “Yes, here’s the number where I am.” So I went back and said, Now what could Lady Bird Johnson say about the Dave Brubeck Quartet that would sound good in the White House before King Hussein of Jordan? I worked on it and phoned her back, and she said, “That’s wonderful! That’s just right. Would you like to come over here?” She said, “Be here by ten o’clock at the diplomatic reception room. Enter at the southwest gate. Of course it’s black tie.”

The concert was after dinner, in the East Room, at ten o’clock. I thought, Oh, Lord, my dinner jacket’s at the cleaners, and they’re closed. I started calling formal wear rental places, getting no answer, and finally one answered but said, “We’re closing now.” I said, “No, don’t close. I’m invited to the White House and I’ve got to get a dinner jacket. I’ll be over there in a few minutes.” So I managed to snag a cab and got over there and got fitted and got there in time. Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond and Eugene Wright and Joe Morello were in the Blue Room, and we were talking, and Dave said, “You must have been here many times, Willis.” I said, “No, Dave, it’s the first time I’ve been here.”

I remember, afterwards, President and Mrs. Johnson went upstairs and King Hussein was to go up to join them in conversation. I’d had a little champagne. When I had arrived there, I was asked, “Would you like some champagne?” It was between dinner and the

concert. I said, “Yes,” and the woman said, “I’ll bring it to you in the bedroom.” I thought, What kind of a party is this? Oh, no, I see – Blue, Green, Red – the Red Room is what she said, and that’s where it was. (Laughter)

Anyway, I’d had a little champagne and was a little more relaxed than need be. So when King Hussein passed by me – the protocol is that a king does not ask a woman to dance. They have to ask him. I remember Dave Brubeck howling with laughter and saying, “Gene Wright, our bassist, was introduced to King Hussein, and he said, ‘Hey, King!’ He thought that was his first name.” (Laughter) Anyway, King Hussein passing by me to go upstairs, I decided to say to him, “Ahlan wa sahlan,” which is Arabic for “My land is your land, My home is your home.” He turned and looked at me and said, “Thank you very much.” (Laughter) You always learn a little bit of the language before you go to any country – I do, anyway – about four basic phrases – and try to get the proper pronunciation, too. Like “Hello,” and “Excuse me,” and “Thank you,” and “Where is the washroom,” and “I don’t understand; I speak only English,” and “May I please have a beer” – because you can’t drink the water. You’ve got to learn these things.

So as a result of that, Bess Abell called on me many times to assist, either onstage, or producing it backstage, or getting in touch with people – even people I couldn’t get on the telephone usually. When there’s a White House operator calling them, oh, do they come to the telephone! Those White House operators can find anybody anywhere. I know. They found me once when I was in another country, hidden away. Incredible.

I was connected with about 40 different events at the White House during different administrations – for LBJ, for President Nixon, and for President Jimmy Carter – and so it was interesting, always different. I have usually been reasonably satisfied with the results of what I was asked to do, or had done. And apparently they were, too, because I kept being invited back for events.

Q: Tell me about the Irving Berlin show – the one you did for his 70th birthday.

CONOVER: The program manager of the Voice of America at that time, Barry Zorthian – a tough guy who scared the hell out of a lot of people, who would stand trembling at his door – one time called me into his office because USIA television had begun and they were hiring engineers from VOA, and he didn’t like that; he said he was losing his engineering staff. Since I had been asked to do some programs for USIA television, including the in-studio announcements of the films that were made at the Newport Jazz Festival, where I served as emcee, in Newport, Rhode Island, he called me in and said, “Willis, don’t you feel you’re doing too much work? Maybe you should just do the Music USA programs on Saturday and Sunday and let the guy who’s doing the weekend shows now do the Monday through Friday.” I knew what he had in mind. He was upset because I was working for USIA television, too – by contract – for things that came up. I got up and closed the door, and said to him, “You’ve got an assistant outside the door here, but you go home with a briefcase that’s bulging with work to be done. Why don’t you give it to him? What do you mean, asking me a question like that?” He said, “Well, look, I’m just asking.” I said, “Well, now you know the answer.” And from that point on we got

along well with each other. I was apparently the only person who ever stood up to him. People were scared to death of him. He could be a tough guy. He was certainly an intelligent guy, a hard-working guy, but he scared the hell out of a lot of people. I happen to have a fondness for Armenians as a people, partly because of George Avakian, who produced great records for Columbia Records, and was a good friend of mine. I had great respect for Barry, but I never worked for anybody. I work with people, but I simply cannot work for someone. And he was coming on in the way I described, and I knew he was giving me, as the expression goes, giving me some shit. But from that time on, Barry knew that I was not going to fold, the way most people did, and we got along beautifully.

So, at his suggestion, with Irving Berlin's 70th birthday, and 50th year in show business or the music industry, coming up, he told me he wanted me to do a salute to Irving Berlin. I wrote to Mr. Berlin at his office in New York. He answered, saying that with this anniversary coming up, the networks had said that they would like to sponsor such a program. He said, "I will not try to make money out of what this country has done for me, but for the Voice of America I will do it."

So I worked for six months on that, while I was doing my regular programs. I lined up Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, for the songs that Irving Berlin wrote for them, particularly for Fred Astaire; Bing Crosby, for White Christmas; I got Benny Goodman for Alexander's Ragtime Band; one of the few times I ever played Guy Lombardo, but I interviewed him for Always, which he had a very popular record of; Ethel Merman, for There's No Business Like Show Business; Eddie Cantor, for other songs, early songs of Irving Berlin; Rudy Vallee for Say It Isn't So – he had the big hit record on that; and Jo Stafford and Paul Weston and Paul Whiteman and others out on the coast in the Hollywood Bowl; Fred Waring; and Kate Smith, who had introduced God Bless America. I found, in the outer office of Irving Berlin's music company – I looked into the files, by invitation – an acetate off-the-air recording of Kate Smith's radio program, in which she was giving the first public performance of God Bless America. She said, "A great song has been written and is now being sung in public for the first time." And the audience cheering and screaming, and she's singing God Bless America with the orchestra behind her. And I asked if I could use that in the program, too. I also interviewed her, to introduce that recording.

And I wanted to get Irving Berlin to speak, too. We had to get his famous song, Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning, which he had written and sung in World War One in Yip, Yip, Yaphank. I got from the studio that had made the film This Is the Army, in which Irving Berlin recreated that, I got him doing that from the soundtrack. And from Decca Records I got a fresh tape from the original master of White Christmas by Bing Crosby. And so forth. I really worked on it.

So then I was playing a good bit of these for Irving Berlin. My engineer at that time, Bob Batchelder, and I went up to New York to play them off in Irving Berlin's office. He was sitting there next to his piano, which he could play in only one key, and so he had a special pedal down below with which he could move the keyboard up or down so he could play in other keys, although he himself could play in only one key at the keyboard.

He sat and listened to all we had with his back to us, because he didn't want the expression on his face to be seen; he was being very moved. I found one of his earliest songs, one of the first songs, and he turned around and said, "Where in God's name did you find that?!"

Then I told about how he and his wife were in love but that her father did not want them to get married because of different levels of society and different religions. Her father had taken her to Europe, and while she was gone Irving wrote all these sad songs: What'll I Do (When You Are Far Away and I Am Here Without You)? – and so forth. And when they came back, her father relented and they got married, and the father and Irving Berlin remained good friends. I had narrated this on the tape, and Berlin turned around and said, "I wondered how you were going to handle that." (Laughter) Meaning it was okay. Later on, we led into – after the interview with Eddie Cantor – "She's not so much in a crowd but when you get her alone, You'd Be Surprised. And I Want to Go Back to Michigan – Oh, how I wish again that I was in Michigan, down on the farm – I love that song," said Eddie Cantor, singing it. He had talked about Irving Berlin's funny little voice. I led from that into Oh, How I Hate to Get Up In the Morning, sung in the tiny, tinny voice of Irving Berlin himself, and the crowd cheering, and there he was from the sound track of This Is the Army, and Berlin turned around and said, "My God, where did you get that?"

Anyway, when it was over, I said, "Mr. Berlin, will you please prepare something as a lead-in to God Bless America?" I mean, after Kate Smith has sung it earlier, also to wind up the program. And he did, and said, "I've been asked, 'What is the wisest decision you ever made?' And I said, 'I did not make that decision. My mother and father did, when they brought me from Russia to America.' And I put my feelings about this great land of ours into a song, God Bless America."

I said, "Mr. Berlin, will you also put on tape, 'Thank you, Mr. President'" – because I wanted to get the president. He said, "You can't get him, he's too busy." I said, "Please put it on tape. If you think I can't get him, will you also put on tape, 'Thank you, Mr. Vice President.' And if you still think I can't get him, then say, 'Thank you, Mr. Conover.'" So I got all those. And I spent several months trying to get President Eisenhower to record a message to go in there so I could say, "Mr. Berlin, there's one more person" – I'd recorded some background tone from his office above Broadway so I could lay in the President's remarks on top of that so that Berlin could respond, "Thank you, Mr. President," and go into his thing.

Well, I kept trying and kept trying and finally got word from the White House: It's not possible. So I said the hell with this. I happened to know two of the sons of Mrs. Eisenhower's sister here in town. So I called one of them and said, "Hey, man, when are you going to see your uncle again?" "Oh, maybe this afternoon." "Well, would you ask him if he'll go to the White House studio and record like 30 seconds of tribute to Irving Berlin?" "Sure." So the next day, there it was. (Laughter) If you go through channels it doesn't always work. Sometimes you just have to go do it. So I had "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower." And then, "Thank you, Mr. President." It makes a nice program.

So that's how that came about. And then Berlin insisted that I come up and play it for people from all the networks and magazines and newspapers and so forth, in his outer office. He was not going to be present, because – I was told by his chief arranger, Helmy Kresa, who arranged all of his music for so many years – “Mr. Berlin does not want people to see the expression on his face as he responds to what he hears; he's very emotional.” We played it, and the next thing we knew, NBC wanted to broadcast the second half of it coast to coast on the NBC network. Well, at that time I guess there was no law against it, and it was approved, as long as they got permission from the participants in the program, who had agreed to do the program on the Voice of America. You know, Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee and Guy Lombardo and Ella Fitzgerald and Benny Goodman and Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and Paul Whiteman and on and on and on. And they got approval, and it was broadcast coast to coast. I was listening to it in the control room here with my engineer at that time, Bob Batchelder, coming through the loudspeaker from NBC, and at the end of it the phone rang. “Willis, this is Irving Berlin. That was wonderful to hear.” (Laughter)

Well, two and a half years ago, when he reached his one hundredth birthday, I thought it was time to do an edited version of it again. I got in touch with people at the White House myself, and said, “Irving Berlin is going to be 100. In the original program broadcast 30 years ago, President Eisenhower addressed him, but I think if we broadcast it now it would be proper to have President Reagan address him. Can you arrange that? And please, because I cannot make any announcement over the room tone I had then, to introduce, will you ask him to introduce himself? I can't do it and drop out of my room tone into a new announcement.” So he did, and they called me and said, “It'll be in the Executive Office Building. If you come by tomorrow morning any time after 8:15 at the entrance right across from such-and-such a street and come on in, it's the first door on the right, and it'll be marked for you only.” And there it was, and I put it in the program, and it got on the air.

Q: I didn't know that.

CONOVER: Oh, yeah. Again, there are people who resent your doing anything, trying to do something well and succeeding to an extent. And that's unfortunate. Some people say, “Why didn't you get it for everybody here?” As opposed to, “Hey, congratulations, that was wonderful. It should have happened 30 years before.” You know, I didn't have to get it at all. When I have been praised for various things, I've said, “Look, you should have other people praised, too, not just me.” And that includes magazine articles about me. I've said, “Look, I'm only doing this program series; there are other things that are very important.”

I know, for example, when Larry King interviewed me on his all-night broadcast. I was not on all night. We went on for an hour of interview and then an hour of phone conversations from people listening all over the USA. And that included people who said, “I listen to you on short wave and wish we could listen to you on a domestic radio station.” I also got a call from a listener, saying, “How do you feel about doing a program

on a CIA-dominated organization like the Voice of America?" I said, "First of all, it's not CIA-dominated. Secondly, it has the most objective newscast I've ever heard anywhere. Yes, it has commentary, too, but it's clearly labeled commentary, and there's an op-ed page as well. Views contrary to the official government position are also broadcast on the Voice of America." There I was being accused of propagandizing. I'm not propagandizing. I think it's a great country, for all its faults, as I said before. We have a system that makes it possible to correct the faults.

Q: But your show has never been overtly political.

CONOVER: My show has never been overtly political. I make no political statements. I broadcast good music, including good musicians from all countries – if they happen to fit the broad range that is the structure of my program. And I broadcast musicians in the Soviet Union, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in Romania, in Bulgaria, in Yugoslavia – for that matter in South Africa. But I also broadcast a record of a South African opera called King Kong, which was a black performance about the white segregators. I broadcast that, and interviewed the star of it, Miriam Makeba, when she came to America, and broadcast that, too. But not to make political statements. You know, it's music. It's music that reflects, that parallels, the structure of our society.

As I've said a number of times: in our music, in the music called jazz, the musicians agree in advance on what key they're going to perform in, at what tempo, what the changes are – that is, what are the harmonies – what's the song – they may skip the melody and create a new melody, or they may play it and then do improvisations on it. But once they've agreed on that, on the range of their performance, they're free to perform whatever they want. And that's parallel to the structure of the USA. We agree in advance on the laws we'll live by, and once we reach that agreement, we're free to do as we wish. In any case, as I said, there are some people who didn't like their parents. We all go through that period when we're growing up into our teens; you've got to rebel against parental domination in order to become independent, but then you adjust, if you do the right thing – if I may borrow that expression from the title of a film I haven't seen yet. And then there are those people who were described as the counter culture, which as far as I'm concerned meant anticulture. They're proud of having damaged things.

Anyway, one of the listeners on the Larry King Show accused me of propagandizing, and I wasn't. I'm doing a music program, free of politics and free of the commercials that I had to throw in when I was doing commercial radio. That was terrible. I had to advertise products and services that either I didn't know anything about but had to sound enthusiastic about, or knew they were bad, and had to sound enthusiastic about. That, literally, bothered my sanity. And I had to do it using semi-literate words written by advertising companies. I couldn't stand that.

And so I brought along a tape of short excerpts of music for the Larry King Show by performers from a number of different countries. Out of each break and each announcement and each news insert and so forth we'd play a little of that music and identify it before going on with the discussion. But I also, while I was there, wrote a

limerick, in response to this call from a person who asked how I felt about broadcasting for a CIA-dominated propaganda agency. And to the limerick I gave the title Marxochists. And it goes like this (copyright renewed 1989):

Though they claim they're exceedingly triste
At the way that our streets are policed,
And they're somewhat abrupt,
Since they feel we're corrupt –
Still, they seldom defect to the East.

I think it was H. L. Mencken who said, "I would never trust anyone who had not been a socialist before he was 20, or who remained one after he was 30." And I also recall someone saying to me, in one of those countries: "Do you know the difference between a democracy and a socialist democracy?" I said, "All right, what's the difference?" He said, "It's like the difference between a chair and an electric chair."

Again, I am not trying to make a political statement. I'm speaking honestly, and this is much more candidly than I speak on my program.

Q: The circumstances are quite different.

CONOVER: Circumstances are different, of course. At the same time, another thing that John Wiggin told me, that I've always appreciated, is: "Never forget, Willis; the Voice of America is a political football." And for that reason I have never gotten up, even when invited to come up and present a program onstage that was being done for a political campaign for whomever – someone running for the presidency or the vice presidency or someone running for Congress – and I have many friends in Congress, I'm happy to say. Some of them make a point of it in the Congressional Record, which makes me very happy. Partly because it tends to put a little damper on the flames that people try to light under me when they feel, "Who the hell does Conover think he is, anyway?"

Q: I want to get back to the foreign musicians. You mentioned that you had played the music of a number of them, but you've also done more than that. You've helped them get concerts and even new careers.

CONOVER: Yes, I have helped get musicians scholarships at the Berklee College of Music. I arranged through friendly people at the Newport Jazz Festival – most of them were friendly, not all of them – to have some good foreign jazz musicians performing there. I have recommended them for orchestras here. I told Woody Herman once about a marvelous musician I had heard in a European country. He said, "You tell him, if he ever comes here I'll hire him." I said, "Woody, you haven't heard him." He said, "Look, if you think he's good, he's good." Now that's nice. Woody was quite a guy.

There were some people from one country who were coming here and the money had been provided by the American embassy in their capital city – not exactly cultural exchange, just out of embassy funds – to take care of their accommodations and travel

here. I needed to get additional support for it, and I went to someone in New Orleans who had a hall with a band in it, and asked him to put some money in and he said he would. But he went bankrupt. And so out of my own pocket – I had promised them we would go to New Orleans – so for 800 bucks I paid the transportation. Eight hundred dollars at the time was the equivalent of about \$5,000 now. Plus arranging hotel accommodations for them down there, just for example, and accommodations here in town, too. The point is, you try to help people who are doing well. You try to support people who are doing well. I think it's important to people who do well to have their good work recognized – in my program but also in talking with people.

When I first began my program here – first taped it in December of 1954, first broadcast in January 1955 – I was with an engineer and a producer from Worldwide English, who disliked jazz and thought it was very funny that he was assigned to my program, and made jokes about it all the time. One Monday he came in, and said, “I was out in Los Angeles last weekend and the Dave Brubeck Quartet was playing at a club in town, and I didn't go. Ha, ha, ha!” So I walked into the control room and said, “Look, instead of my pointing at you and you pointing at the engineer, you go on back to English and I'll point to the engineer.” From that time on, beginning then, my program was the first at the Voice of America done without a producer, and since then the production duties have been shared by me and the engineer.

That has included some outstanding engineers. Not all. Some of them don't like the music. For some people, any job – in any business, or any place in any agency in any country – is just a job, just a way to get the bills paid, just a way to build up retirement benefits, etc. And to me, I think, you know, “Retire to what?” Thirty years of doing nothing and what have you got above your shoulders, between your ears, when you retire, if you haven't tried to do well at the same time?

I won't name all the engineers, but I had Bob Batchelder for a number of years – outstanding. Vert Mandelstam, who was in charge of the engineers, was certainly outstanding and a big supporter. Jim Finn was with me for ten years. He's a musician. He's retired now. And after ten years he told me, “Willis, you know, I've been told if I don't apply for a supervisor's job this year I could never be accepted in a higher grade, and I've got two kids to put through college,” and so forth. He did, and he said to me afterward, “Many's the time I wished I had stayed with you.” He was outstanding, and so was another guy, Donald McDonald, whom we know as Mac McDonald, who was with me for three or four years, and he was outstanding. I'm happy to say that he has become chief of operations here at VOA. He knows what I need; he's worked with me; he knows what I'm doing.

Q: You really have been lucky with your engineers – very.

CONOVER: Well, I've been lucky, and I've also been unlucky several times. I won't go into ...

Q: But those you named were outstanding.

CONOVER: They were outstanding. And now I've got an outstanding engineer, and have for several years: Efim Drucker, who before he came here with his family in the early 70's, in one of the Jewish emigrations from the Soviet Union, was mixing live music for Russian films and then at night would go home and listen to my program on his radio. So he knows the music. You see those posters up there along the wall, of Miles and Coltrane and Gil Evans and Duke Ellington and Sarah Vaughan? He put those up. Over there, posters of Bud Powell and Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday. He put those up. He knows the music, he loves the music, and he knows how to do a program very well – an outstanding engineer.

Back-up engineer, Ken Winters – also outstanding. And he's young enough to have grown up listening to rock. But he likes the music I'm doing. And that makes a big difference, because people who have some taste can grow up learning the music that's popular when they're growing up but then can go on to music that's better. He's doing that.

No, I've been lucky and I've been unlucky. Some people have been offended. There was one engineer here – he's not here now – who, when I was mixing 78 rpm disks with LP's, where, as you know, even though the volume indicator would be exactly the same – as television stations say that commercials are not louder than the regular programming, so if you turn it way down at night you won't bother the neighbors, somehow the commercials sound louder – so while the volume indicator may reach exactly the same place, there's something in there that makes it come through more strongly to the ear. Well, that was true of LP's, as opposed to 78's, so when I mixed them in a program I would say, "On the 78's, make the volume a little above peak and the LP's next to them a little below peak, so that they will sound to the ear about the same." He said, "No." I said, "What is that for?" And he said, "There's a governor on the transmitter. They'll come out exactly the same way they were in the first place." I said, "Fine, but meanwhile there are the loudspeakers, the strowgers in the offices around here, and the people listening are not going to make that distinction; they're going to hear something that sounds much louder than some thing right next to it and wonder what's wrong with us in here. You've got to be concerned with promotion within the premises as well." I said, "I've heard that you resent the fact that my name is on my program. But you chose a job with security. You've got security; you've got retirement benefits. I don't. I chose this, less security, no retirement benefits – and my name goes on it. So stop resenting the fact that the attention is coming to me for what I do. You chose security."

I'm just saying that there are exceptions. Nevertheless I've been very, very fortunate, and I've always, over the years from the very beginning, from the first time I was interviewed by a magazine about my program here, I made a point of saying, "My engineer in there is so good it's as if I had my own hands in the control room." Vert Mandelstam, in charge of the engineers, told them about my saying that, and it wound up in the magazine and he read it off to them. And there was an engineer – no longer here – in the hallway, who said, "Listen, Conover, the other engineers won't talk to you but I'll tell you. I may not be as good as some, because my eyes are bad, but I could still do a good job for your

program.” I said, “Wait a minute. What are you resenting? Giving all the praise to this guy over here.” I said, “Look, man, it’s the first time anyone in this place has given credit to an engineer, in a story, for the success of his program.” “Well, I just want you to know how we feel about it.” And he stormed off. Well, this was about 30 years ago. So if I saw him in the hallway I’d say, “Good morning,” but he wouldn’t answer. And once after he passed by I thought of coming up behind him and screaming, “Good morning!” and scare the hell out of him, but decided not to. Now, I’m speaking of a definite minority, and please make sure that it’s understood that these are very few people. They’re still around; different people, but there are still that kind of people around.

Q: Are there any other special programs like the Irving Berlin and the Ellington shows that you’d like to talk about?

CONOVER: Okay. The people I’ve interviewed for the Voice of America: Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Sammy Cahn, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Tony Bennett, Peggy Lee, Eubie Blake, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Eddie Condon, Bill Evans, Gil Evans, Paquito D’Rivera, Earl Hines, Hoagy Carmichael, W.C. Handy, Bing Crosby, Nat “King” Cole, Mel Tormé, Andre Previn, Gunther Schuller, Billy Taylor, George Shearing, Dave Brubeck, Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Thelonious Monk, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Cannonball Adderley, Susanna McCorkle, Dave Frishberg – there’s no end to it, about 200 different names. I got Louis Armstrong when I was his emcee for a week at Carter Barron Amphitheater; I got him to do five hours of his life story. Also: five U.S. presidents have tape-recorded remarks for my programs.

One thing that upset me very much – there was a supervisor here who told someone in his office to come around and get my interview with Billie Holiday that I did three years before she died, and to make it into a program. So I ran it off for this guy, and he scripted it and it was narrated and broadcast, and – “Billie Holiday was a prostitute! Billie Holiday was a drug addict!” And so forth. Isn’t that lovely?! That was to downgrade what I was playing. As I’ve said to you, Cliff, people who came up with you can never see anything wrong with. It was one of those people. No point in putting a name in here.

You may recall one time I was called in, and you were, too, and you said, “I don’t agree with everything he said,” and I was being criticized – “Why are you playing this? What’s this about Jeepers Creepers?” I said, “Johnny Mercer telling me in an interview how he was stuck with getting a lyric and a title for music that had been given to him with just two notes: ding, ding; ding, ding – and couldn’t think of anything, and was watching the movie The Grapes of Wrath, and Henry Fonda said, “Jeepers Creepers!” and Johnny Mercer said, “That’s it!” He made that into the song, and it was the first song that Louis Armstrong sang in a movie in which he also played a part, not just an entertainer. Furthermore, it showed that the Voice of America would broadcast the name Henry Fonda regardless of Jane Fonda’s political leanings. So your friend said, “Well, maybe this song. But what about this one?”

I thought, this is the first time I've had to explain to anyone why I'm broadcasting what I broadcast. This was the kind of attempt to downgrade me because I am not an ass kisser. I believe in diplomacy but I do not go around and bow and scrape to anyone regardless. I'm not envious of anyone's position of authority or income or fame, but I also do not bow down and act that way. This was resented, and an attempt was made to destroy the name of one of the performers, in this case Billie Holiday, who went through a hell of a life – discrimination and rape and a bunch of other things, and got involved in narcotics.

Q: And a great talent.

CONOVER: Great talent, no question about it. To downgrade this person because her music was being broadcast on my program.... As I say, these people are in the minority, but they do exist, in all organizations in all countries. Once again, I get strong support, from the top, from the director of the Agency and the director of the Voice right now, and of course between the beginning and now. Some, no. No point in going year by year, or going name by name.

Q: Back to the subject of foreign musicians. Whatever happened to Adam Makowicz?

CONOVER: Adam Makowicz – a pianist whom I first heard performing at an international festival in Tallinn, Estonia, in 1967 – and I heard him many times in Poland after that. He was outstanding, and at one event in Warsaw, when correspondents from many countries – correspondents for the jazz magazine, Jazz Forum, which is edited and published in Warsaw and is the magazine of the International Jazz Federation with correspondents from all over the world – they were invited, and guests like me were invited, too, to a cocktail party with music afterward, and Adam Makowicz sat down at the piano to play. He played so beautifully that – I don't normally do something like this – when the applause ended, I stood up and said, "Let me just say something. If a list were made of the 100 top musicians in countries around the world, Adam Makowicz would be one of the first ten." He wrote to me after that, and said, "Willis, I want you to know that what you said then has made a tremendous difference in my career." He came here because Benny Goodman raved about him to John Hammond, and John Hammond – who had made Benny Goodman famous by getting him recorded, and getting him Fletcher Henderson's arrangements, and getting him Gene Krupa and Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton and Billie Holiday for that matter – John Hammond arranged for Adam Makowicz to come here and perform at the Cookery in Greenwich Village. I covered the opening date with interviews, and also the music, for the Voice of America.

Also, Adam was asked to be one of four pianists on the stage at Carnegie Hall in salute to the memory of Erroll Garner. The first was Teddy Wilson; second, Adam; third, George Shearing; and fourth, Earl "Fatha" Hines. No amplification; unamplified piano. And I was backstage with him to make sure everything worked out okay. Adam was the only one who got a standing ovation. Then when he went back to Eastern Europe, to keep things in balance he was sent on a tour of the Soviet Union. And he said, "Because of your broadcasts, Willis, I received more money than I've ever received before on such a trip. Everywhere I went, people said, 'You play Carnegie Hall; I hear it on Willis

Conover program.””

Adam Makowicz and his wife Irena returned to the USA and have become American citizens. Just a week or so ago, I received from them a CD of his most recent recording. It was made at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland in July of 1988, one of the last records produced by the late Nesuhi Ertegun, with a note saying, “Willis, the record has not come out yet. We have been sent some advance copies, and I am sending you the first one.” I’ve made several programs out of it. He also included some photocopies of newspaper stories about him, that said when he was 16 years old, when he was studying classical music at the Chopin Secondary School of Music in Krakow, Poland, he heard on Willis Conover’s VOA program, Music USA, Art Tatum playing the piano, and decided to become a jazz musician. He is heralded by all critics now, one of the best in the world.

Q: I thought he was when I heard him years ago.

CONOVER: Absolutely. He was then, and he continues to be, and he continues to grow. And I’m proud to be one of their friends, proud to have contributed to his various decisions, and proud that they feel I helped him, at least, to become the star that he is and will continue to be.

Q: The associations that you have had through the years with American musicians in festivals, as well as foreign musicians in their festivals, has certainly enabled you to enrich your own program vastly beyond what you’d be able to do just depending on records.

CONOVER: That’s right.

Q: Are there any other particular memories, high points, we may have missed?

CONOVER: I’m sure I’ll think of some other things. Having grown up a romantic and an idealist, I made some serious mistakes in my life. But about five years ago there was an article about me in The Washington Post by W. Royal Stokes, who had been part of the Washington jazz scene when I too was part of that scene and was now writing for The Washington Post. He is currently writing for Jazz Times and is also completing a book for Oxford University Press. He wanted to do an article about me, and he did, and it took up half a page. I got a letter from a woman saying, “I saw this story in The Washington Post, and I saw ‘Voice of America’ and ‘Willis Conover.’ I was in the People’s Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution was under way, and I listened to you every night and learned about America through your broadcasts of Artie Shaw and Duke Ellington, and the police were just a few doors away so I had to listen very quietly.”

Well, I was not well at that time, and my office wrote a letter back to her saying so, and she sent a get well card. I don’t normally try to get in touch with a woman who has written me a fan letter, but under the circumstances I thought I should. I said, “Find out how to reach her,” and I called. No accent whatsoever. I said, “Would you like to see the Voice of America?” “Yes.” We made an appointment and she came by, and I showed it

to her, and we went out for a drink and a bite to eat, and we continued – and we married three years ago. Evelyn is her occidental name. And she’s been wonderful for me – unlike some women I have known. And so the program led to that, too. She straightened out my taxes and my debts and ...

Q: So she was just a listener!

CONOVER: That’s right.

Q: Just a listener.

CONOVER: So that’s a high point. She had a master’s degree in East Asian history. She has returned to school and got a second master’s degree in investigative journalism. At the moment she is ending a summer internship with the Gannett Corporation. At some point she’ll get a Ph.D., but meanwhile her work is very much in demand. She was a professional writer before, had stories published in English in a number of magazines, and drawings – portraits, and so forth – also published professionally. She speaks five languages, and she’s very, very good.

Q: So you have a whole new life.

CONOVER: Yep. That’s right. Also a great sense of humor. She said, “You know what song the Chinese cook sings while he’s working?” I said, “What?” She said, “Fry Me to the Moon.” (Laughter) And then she also had an old joke, which I thought was great. She points to the little finger on her left hand, and says, “Do you know why the Japanese cannot use this finger – not this finger,” pointing to her index finger, “but this finger over here?” I said, “Why?” And she said, “Because it’s mine.” (Laughter)

One time I took her to see Dizzy Gillespie at Blues Alley and he came and sat with us. I had to go to the washroom, and when I came back he was howling with laughter. I said, “What?” He said, “I said to her, ‘How would you like to have a torrid, illicit love affair?’ And she brightened up and said, ‘With whom?’” (Laughter) He said, “That’s the best answer I’ve ever been given to that question! And I’m only joking.” Sense of humor. Intelligence. Decency.

Q: And a jazz fan.

CONOVER: Not just jazz. She can whistle Bach, and in tune and in tempo. And not just Bach – Chopin and Beethoven and so forth.

Q: I think that’s the proper note to end on.

CONOVER: I think that will do for now.

Q: Thank you, Willis.

End of interview