POLITICS & THE PEOPLE

Antidote to Soft Power: Johan Grimonprez's Soundtrack to a Coup d'État

by GERALD HORNE and ANTHONY BALLAS February 28, 2025

"... imperialism removes arts from humanity, making 'art' a mysterious marketable commodity that must reflect the pathology and philosophy of imperialism to be valued."

— Amiri Baraka, Digging

"I announce the death of Union Minière, and the consummation of flowers."

— Archie Shepp, "Mama Rose"

Johan Grimemprez's newest documentary, *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État*, is a stunning cinematic achievement. Composed of archival footage, including television, newsreel, concert footage, home movies, and footnotes, the film recounts the lurid history of the U.S. and Belgium-backed coup against Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of independent Congo, which culminated in his assassination in January 1961. The film features a critical and historical account of the cultural significance of Black music against the geopolitical backdrop of the Cold War era, including the U.S. State Department's use of so-called "Jazz Ambassadors" as a form of soft power through its sponsoring of concert tours abroad for Southern musical icons such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Nina Simone, Duke Ellington, and others.

Embroiled in the newly emergent Cold War in the mid to late 1940s, the United States employed coercive measures seeking to block Soviet influence from gaining traction domestically, in the labor movement in particular. Through a variety of Red Scare and Black Scare tactics, including McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee, and legal maneuvers such as the Taft-Hartley Act—which decimated the labor movement and purged unions of radical leadership under the perceived threat of communism—the U.S. exercised no scarcity of repressive strategies. These actions culminated in both the Hollywood Blacklist and the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten, as well as the Smith Act Trials, which resulted in prison time, deportation, and the loss of economic livelihood for many luminaries of the Black left such as Claudia Jones, Paul Robeson, Ben Davis, and W.E.B. Du Bois for their perceived sympathies with Moscow.

In tandem with these repressive, legal, and extra-legal means, the State Department also waged a cultural front abroad during the early decades of the Cold War, seeking to curry favor and win influence via the spread of Black music to the Eastern Bloc, as well as to African, Asian and Eastern European nations. From the perspective of the U.S. State Department, Black musicians could function as a sort of Trojan Horse for the spread of American values. The "Jazz Ambassadors" were thus devised by the State Department to fulfill the cultural mission of Americanisation abroad; an unabashed attempt to export a perverse brand of American exceptionalism and thereby launder the violent history of United States Slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy in the process. By employing Black musicians, many if not most of whom had already faced virulent racism and economic exploitation at home, the State Department sought to lubricate a

path toward U.S. cultural influence beyond its borders.

What is striking about the Jazz Ambassadors is the way the State Department's motives weren't necessarily kept secret in the 1950s. Grimenprez quotes the *New York Times* early on in *Soundtrack*, describing "America's secret weapon [a]s a blue note in a minor key," while, in another *New York Times* piece, employing the bizarre imagery of the "skydiving turntable" being "tossed out of the sky with pro-American music, the 10-ounce turntable can help win the cold war"—a grotesque symbol of how the United States tactically deployed Black musicians abroad with near military precision (*NYT*, 6 Nov. & 11 Nov. 1955). As it was put by Willis Conover, the well-known broadcaster of the *Voice of America Jazz Hour*, a radio organ funded by the U.S. Government, regarding the spread of the sounds of American culture abroad: "We can achieve our goal in this most critical of battles: the winning of men's minds."

Against the backdrop of the historic conjuncture in which the Civil Rights Movement domestically overlapped with anti-colonial movements in Guinea, Ghana, the Congo, and elsewhere, seeking the expulsion of European colonial supremacy from much of the continent—as well as with the Bandung Conference of 1955 in recent memory—the film portrays agents of the United States and their North Atlantic Allies, most notably, Belgium, as though they were lashing out like animals backed into a corner. With the retreat of some of the more egregious aspects of Jim Crow in the 1950s in the United States, contradictions nonetheless continued to mount domestically and abroad. The Suez Crisis, for instance, and the subsequent British, French, and Israeli attack on Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, was a key geopolitical turning point during this tumultuous time. It may be interesting to note that the master trumpeter, Dizzy Gillespie, who cheekily claimed to have been fighting a "Cool War" with music during this fraught era of Cold War politics, was refused entrance into Egypt during the Suez Crisis.

Still image from Johan Grimonprez's *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*

The Non-Aligned Movement was spearheaded in 1961 by Nasser, Sukarno of Indonesia, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of independent Ghana, and others, as well as Nikita Khrushchev's fiery denouncements of the North Atlantic nations for backing colonialism not only in the Congo, but in Africa more generally. It became crystal clear to Washington, Brussels, and other complicit North Atlantic nations that a burgeoning internationalism was afoot, threatening Euroamerican supremacy. The Congo was a concentrated site of anxiety in particular, given Washington's interests in the Katanga region in the south of the country, where Uranium-rich mines had already supplied the U.S. military with enough firepower to flatten Nagasaki and Hiroshima in the preceding decade. Adding to this preoccupation was the fear that the Soviets might gain a foothold in the region, despite evidence to the contrary. The Belgian-owned Union Minière mining company, for instance, was curiously privatized only three days before Belgium's King Baudouin begrudgingly agreed to Congo's independence, a portentous sign of what was to befall the region, and Lumumba himself shortly thereafter, at the hands of the monstrous admixture of private business and colonial governmentality.

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The film critically examines Louis Armstrong's involvement with the U.S. State Department, specifically, the latter's sponsoring of his concert tour in the Congo in the middle of the civil war between Lumumba in Leopoldville and Joseph Mobutu, and his Western-backed faction in the breakaway region of Katanga, backed by Belgium. According to Larry Devlin, CIA Station Chief in the Congo at the time, the CIA used Armstrong's concert as cover to coordinate Lumumba's assassination—a clear instance of soft power as a cover for surreptitious political machinations of the international intelligence apparatus. In an interview in *Soundtrack*, Devlin asserts that President Eisenhower gave the orders to assassinate Lumumba, and was even alleged to have added, suggestively, that Lumumba "should fall into a Crocodile infested river." U.S. Ambassador to Brussels, William Burden—also, interestingly, on the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) board of trustees at the time—described Lumumba as "a nuisance," and pointed to "political assassination" as the only viable option.

Although construed as a "Goodwill mission" to the Congo, and accompanied by well-deserved fanfare for this icon of 20th-century music, Armstrong's concert to which he played for crowds of upwards of 145,000 people, may well have taken the spotlight away from Mubutu's Belgium-backed coup against Lumumba. When Armstrong learned of the ruse, he threatened to renounce his citizenship and move to Ghana. Armstrong had been spied on by the FBI as early as 1948, while Duke Ellington, another "race leader" and Jazz Ambassador, was surveilled even earlier in 1938.

Still image from Johan Grimonprez's Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat

One of the opening sequences of *Soundtrack* features a news reporter commenting on "The Year of Africa," asking when 1960 will be remembered in the future, "what sounds

will you hear?' This question ought to make us reflect on the unique role of Black music in the 20th century to combat the political and cultural subterfuges of U.S. imperialism abroad and white supremacy domestically. The film not only examines the U.S. government's use of Black musicians as a form of soft power abroad, but importantly showcases and examines the numerous ways in which musicians such as Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, and others used their talents to organize against U.S. and European complicity and in protest of the material support of colonialism and imperialism.

By centralizing the role Lincoln played in particular, along with concert footage of her passionate vocals in the *Freedom Now! Suite* with paramount drummer Max Roach, *Soundtrack* highlights the way the music served as a form of social critique, directly confronting the state department's malfeasance, and the United Nations Security Council's complicity in Lumumba's murder. Lincoln, along with Maya Angelou and about 60 other protestors, descended on the United Nations General Assembly on February 13, 1961, only days after Lumumba's assassination was announced; a protest which spilled out into the streets.

Soundtrack to a Coup d'État accomplishes something quite radical aesthetically and therefore politically. The film offers a unique stylistic counterpoint to the ruses of soft power. Through its use of montage, the film employs a collision of often disparate visual, sonic, and textual elements, demanding the viewer's attention and thereby offering an antidote to the rote, distraction economy of social media and continuous play streaming platforms that clog up so much of our contemporary media sphere.

By centralizing the archive as a site of political struggle, *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État* asks us to stop and consider how the narrative is itself crafted and presented for mass consumption, and, in this way, the film serves as a poignant reminder of the constructed, often propagandistic function of historical narratives and the ideologies which inform how they are produced, reproduced, circulated, and maintained, whether through mechanisms of soft power or otherwise. As a chronicle of how power often colludes with culture in the construction of a mythological past, the film ought to provoke us to consider how the reconstruction of our histories is of utmost importance in our present era, as the threat of neo-fascism has already been unleashed upon us with its varieties of modern mythmaking and soft power.

TAGGED: Blackness fascism Global South Music

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