

Willis Conover a DJ who was known as the most famous American that virtually no American had ever heard of. Over the years I've watched to learn who is buried at Arlington National Cemetery and in recent years it has taken a good deal of pressure to have individuals qualify for burial in that hallowed place of rest. Some of my favorite people are buried there, Joe Lewis the World Champion Boxer is there and I learned today that broadcast great Willis Conover Jr. 1920-1996 is there too.

By the time Willis was drafted into the Army in 1942 and started hanging out at a USO canteen near the White House, he knew enough to know that the syrupy strings of Kostelanetz, which society volunteers were playing on the record player, was no music to dance to. Then Conover rummaged through a stack of records and came up with The Dorsey's and Artie Shaw, one of the hostesses was so impressed with the clientele's reaction to the music that she introduced Willis to her husband, a radio station manager. Within a few years Conover was a popular disc jockey with the only jazz program in the city. He also arranged concerts and almost offhandedly brought about the desegregation of Washington's nightclubs.



Willis Conover could be an unknown to his own country men, but as a boy I remember his dulcet tones and his big time Jazz program over VOA. Those days VOA had a lot of domestic transmitters running night and day and were very easy to pickup. Things have changed greatly in that department. Conover was a legend amongst jazz lovers primarily due to the hour-long program on the Voice of America called "VOA Music U.S.A." Known for his fine baritone voice, many would argue that he was the most important presenter on the VOA. Conover was not well known in the U.S. even among jazz aficionados. His visits to Eastern Europe and Russia brought huge crowds and star treatment for him.

On a trip Willis made to Moscow a taxi driver recognized him by his distinctive deep-toned voice. He was a celebrity figure in the old Soviet Union, where jazz was very popular and the Voice of America was a prime source of information as well as music. Willis fought the cold war with music, he expired in 1996 of cancer. Our subject, tall, angular with black-rimmed glasses liked to say "the music of freedom," and to those who had no freedom it became such a symbol of hope that at the peak of the cold war it was estimated that VOA had 30 million regular listeners in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. And as many as 100 million worldwide. Conover who was divorced, is survived by a brother Walter and a sister Elizabeth Davison.

In 1993 the House of representatives honored our subject with a resolution praising the man who had been called one of the country's greatest foreign-policy tools.

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