



INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FEDERATION

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STATEMENT FROM INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FEDERATION

ON THE OCCASION OF THE BENEFIT CONCERT

IN WASHINGTON D.C., DECEMBER 7th 1987

ON BEHALF OF THE CZECH JAZZ SECTION

Greetings to all friends of jazz music and of justice in the United States!

On Wednesday 11th March, 1987, I sat in a small courtroom in Prague District Court and heard the Chairman of the Court pronounce sentences on seven leading members of the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians' Union. In the corridor outside the Courtroom, more than fifty members and friends of the Jazz Section maintained a steady handclap - a message of support that was clearly heard and appreciated inside.

All seven were found guilty of illegal trading; five were given suspended sentences but two - Karel Šrp and Vladimír Kouril - were sent to prison for 16 months and 10 months respectively. Illegal trading is a charge usually brought against black marketeers conducting private business outside of the state structure. Because the Jazz Section continued to sell its publications to its members after the authorities abolished the Jazz Section in October 1984, the authorities accused its members of trading as individuals. Thus, the charges of illegal trading were simply a device to stifle the Jazz Section.

So, what is the Jazz Section and what has it done to provoke the Czech authorities to the point that feel impelled to imprison its leaders?

The Jazz Section is a cultural organisation, formed in 1971. As its name implies it had its roots in jazz music but in addition to organising jazz festivals, it has mounted exhibitions, arranged lectures, organised concerts of avant-garde rock music and published books about music, theatre, film and the visual arts - in fact, provided the kind of cultural activity that is considered both necessary and normal in most civilised countries. Its members are ordinary Czech citizens who like to keep abreast of current developments in music and the other arts.

The Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians' Union has been a member organisation of the International Jazz Federation since 1979. IJF, in turn, is a member organisation of the International Music Council of UNESCO. The IJF recognises the right of the Jazz Section, in accordance with IJF statutes, to continue its membership of IJF until such time as it voluntarily decides to terminate its membership.

The IJF has carefully monitored the work of the Jazz Section and is fully satisfied that this has always conformed with the spirit of the statutes of the IJF. It is also satisfied that there is no evidence whatsoever that any of the persons arrested made any personal financial gain from their work for the Jazz Section.

Head Office

Kjell-Ake Svensson, Treasurer,
International Jazz Federation,
Swedenborgsgatan 1, 116 48 Stockholm, Sweden
(Tel: 08-42 21 19)

President's Office

Charles Alexander, President,
International Jazz Federation
13, Foulser Road, London SW17 8UE,
Great Britain (Tel: 01-767 2213)

Secretariat

Annette Hauber Secretary
International Jazz Federation
International Music Institute Darmstadt
Nieder-Ramstädter Strasse 190,
D-6100 Darmstadt, Fed. Republic Germany
(Tel: 06151 13-24-16)

The Jazz Section is not a political organisation; it has not set out to undermine the Czech state. Indeed, it has been careful always to work within the framework of Czech law. It was the action of the authorities in removing their legal status in 1984, however, that placed the Jazz Section outside the law.

Perhaps it was their popularity and success that provoked the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of the Interior to attack, harrass and undermine the Jazz Section for ten years before finally abolishing it. Perhaps the extraordinary vitality and creativity of the Jazz Section embarrassed the officials of the Ministry of Culture, making them painfully aware of the aridity of their own programmes and ideas. Worse still, perhaps the Czech people and senior Government officials would begin to question the effectiveness of the Ministry of Culture and ask why it is not doing the things for which the Jazz Section has found such a demand.

We can only speculate at the motivations of the authorities, but there is no doubt that the case of the Jazz Section and the publicity it has received world-wide is of continuing embarrassment to them. Jazz Section members consider that the sentences of the accused members would have been much harsher without the spotlight of international protest. We can also detect a certain shift in the attitude of the authorities. This was evident in the statement of the Chairman of the Court who, in his summing-up, actually acknowledged the high quality of the cultural work of the Jazz Section.

In spite of this, the appeal against the sentences of the accused was rejected by the Municipal Court on 12th May 1987, and the Chairman of the Jazz Section, Karel Srp, remains in prison. He is due to be released on January 2nd but there is still the possibility that further charges will be brought against Srp, leading perhaps to a further prison sentence.

The IJF calls upon the Czech authorities to quash the sentences passed upon the seven Jazz Section members, to release Karel Srp from prison and to allow the Jazz Section again to make its contribution as one of the positive forces in the continuing development of Czechoslovak jazz life.

Finally, this concert in Washington D.C. is a testimony to the generosity of spirit of the American jazz community. It would be inconceivable to think of a world without jazz music. America created this music and gave it to the world. It is inspiring that her musicians and audiences uphold the right of people everywhere to perform jazz music, to listen to jazz music and to contribute to its further development.

Charles Alexander,
President,
International Jazz Federation
London, December 2nd, 1987