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Dave Brubeck wins medal for spreading jazz abroad

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By Arshad Mohammed

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Jazz pianist Dave Brubeck accepted a State Department award on Tuesday for promoting America with concerts in countries from Iraq to Poland, and he won praise from the top U.S. diplomat, who listened to his music as a girl.

"As a little girl I grew up on the sounds of Dave Brubeck because my dad was your biggest fan," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said at ceremony where Brubeck received the department's Ben Franklin Award for public diplomacy.

"Thank you for your patriotism and your leadership in representing America by introducing the language, the sounds and the spirit of jazz to new generations around the world," she added.

Best known for his quartet's 1959 hit "Take Five," Brubeck, 87, then sat down at a piano to play his improvisational piece "dziekuje," which means "thank you" in Polish, composed partly in memory of his mother's love for Polish composer Frederic Chopin.

Brubeck, who toured Eastern Europe in 1971 for the State Department, said the popularity of jazz has waned over the last 50 years "but in a cultural sense, it's still very important because it's the voice of freedom."

"Every country has a group of young -- or old -- people that live in a desire to be free," he said, saying people in former Soviet satellites took great risks by playing jazz.

"If you got caught ... lost your identity cards, you could never get a good job, you could never go to school, to the university, because you loved jazz," he said. "Why? Because it's freedom that they wanted to stop and jazz was that voice of freedom and it still is."

Brubeck made his first State Department journey in 1958, when he took a two-month trip to Poland, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, saying he got a warm welcome everywhere and "really great" reception in India.

Asked why he took time out of a busy career to perform on behalf of the government, Brubeck chuckled, saying he went at former President Dwight D. Eisenhower's request.

"President Eisenhower was very important to me because I was in World War II in Patton's army. When you get a request from the top, from the general ..." he told reporters.

"You salute," said his wife of 65 years, Iola.

Three organizations also received the Ben Franklin award: nonprofit group Search for Common Ground, consumer products maker Johnson & Johnson Inc. and the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy.

(Reporting by Arshad Mohammed; Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

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