Jazz Legends, Indian Masters Join Forces for Goodwill Celebration

As Herbie Hancock, George Duke and Dee Dee Bridgewater entered the Ravi Shankar Institute of the Performing Arts in New Delhi in February, they noted the welcome sign adorning the entrance: “Peace Through Music.” It was the first time that Hancock and sitarist Shankar met and played together—a convergence of cultures reminiscent of the event they were celebrating.

The U.S. State Department, Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations began planning this event last summer. The musicians gathered for the tour, which included concerts in New Delhi and Mumbai, between Feb. 13 and 18 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s month-long pilgrimage to India to study Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings on nonviolence. Martin Luther King III was also part of the group of visiting dignitaries.

Besides the main concerts in New Delhi and Mumbai, the headliners and students from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz in New Orleans performed at an orphanage as part of an outreach program in Mumbai. At the Ravi Shankar Institute, Hancock and Shankar taught a master class.

“There’s no greater ambassador than a musician for goodwill among nations,” Duke said. “Music is the true international language. It speaks to people’s hearts and you don’t need a language to be completely understood. Musicians can do way more than any politician on a one-to-one level.”

The U.S. Information Agency, as part of the State Department, founded the Jazz Ambassador program in the mid-1950s to counter Soviet propaganda in the midst of the Cold War. During the past decade, the Jazz Ambassador program has seen a revival in its transformation into programs like The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad, co-organized by New York’s Jazz at Lincoln Center.

“If you’re going to celebrate an American transformation, what better art form than jazz?” said Michael Macy, cultural attaché for the U.S. Cultural Affairs Office. “Jazz is popular in India. It communicates to an Indian audience. And we had tabla player Zakir Hussain, who has his own influence on American music.”

This was Hancock’s third Jazz Ambassador tour of India (his first was in 1996 with the Monk Institute) and Duke’s second in three years, performing before with Al Jarreau, Ravi Coltrane and Earl Klugh.

“This is a great moment for the musicians to be working under Hancock and hopefully that will help bring more of the Indian art forms out there,” Hussain said.

Bridgewater said the musicians’ visit met their expectations.

“Music is a healing force,” Bridgewater said. “Just the reaction of the audience in Delhi was evidence that music could indeed bridge cultural gaps.”

—Brian Drayer