

## Review: International Jazz Day, Istanbul

*N. Buket Cengiz reports on an event marked by star-studded concerts and discussions that revealed the 'heretofore unknown' rhetorical powers of bassist Marcus Miller*

On 30 April, the sun shone with the hum of jazz tunes in Istanbul, inviting Istanbulites to wake up for a day of a sweet rush in the host city for International Jazz Day 2013. The 32nd International Istanbul Film Festival, a major cinema festival in Europe, had been wrapped up just a couple of weeks prior with yet another collection of unforgettable memories, and the city was ready for the International Jazz Day event to be celebrated in collaboration with the Republic of Turkey and Istanbul Jazz Festival as the host city partner, with preparations underway since winter.

In Istanbul, culture and arts as well as night life are remarkable, particularly for music enthusiasts. Throughout the year, there is an abundance of clubs to choose from, and thanks to its temperate climate, there are open air concerts and festivals as well. All year round, rock and indie, classical, ethnic and folk, and of course jazz tunes flit about the city, particularly during the never-ending summer nights. Istanbul is proud of its two international jazz festivals: The Istanbul Jazz Festival organized by Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), which will celebrate its 20th anniversary this July, and the Akbank Jazz Festival, which will be held for the 23rd time this September. Both of these festivals host outstanding international and national musicians and bands every year, while also introducing and promoting novice musicians, giving new generations the opportunity to listen to the legends of the genre; in fact, both of these festivals have been functioning as a school of jazz for music lovers in the country.

The interest in and bond with jazz music in Turkey is significant, and it has resulted in numerous outstanding works with collaborations of jazz and folk/ethnic musicians at the national and international levels. That is why, when Istanbul was announced as the host city for the International Jazz Day in its second year, jazz lovers from around the world hailed this decision enthusiastically. However, Turkey's significance in jazz history is not limited to outstanding musical products and great concerts all around the year: the Erteğün story constitutes the other dimension of this nexus. **Love of jazz: a family legacy** In 1934, Mehmet Münir Erteğün was named Turkey's ambassador to Washington, D.C., and moved into that city with his family. His two sons Nesuhi, 17 and Ahmet, 11 became interested in jazz music and started to spend time in the Howard Theatre, and soon became real fans of the genre. Owing to their warm and charming personalities, they succeeded in making friends with jazz legends of the era such as Duke Ellington, Lena Horne and Jelly Roll Morton, and eventually these friendships were carried into the private sphere: the ambassador's residence.

Well-known big bands of the era, including those led by Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Jimmie Lunceford, who would usually play on Saturday nights, accepted the Sunday lunch invitations of the Erteğün brothers, after which jam sessions would develop. These spontaneous moments of musical sharing were called "Washington's most famous private jam sessions" by *The Washington Post* in 1943.

Ambassador Erteğün's friendship with black jazz musicians in those years of segregation disturbed the racist sentimentalities of some Southern senators, especially by the fact that they were entering the house from the front door. On such occasions of reaction, Erteğün's reply would be as follows: "In my home, friends enter by the front door — however we can arrange for you to enter from the back," and this statement by the late ambassador has been widely repeated down to the present day. Namık Tan, Turkey's current ambassador to Washington, launched the Erteğün Jazz Series at the same Washington residence in 2011 to pay tribute to this brave gentleman who was a sincere jazz lover and a pioneer anti-racist.

The Erteğün brothers' love for jazz music did not remain solely as a hobby; in 1947, Ahmet founded Atlantic Records. The records published by the record company, such as songs by Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and the Drifters, changed the shape of American popular music forever; and the jazz section of the label led by Nesuhi introduced the albums of jazz legends such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Herbie Mann, Charles Mingus and the Modern Jazz Quartet to the world. The story of this record company was recalled in Istanbul in detail with the screening of the film *The House That Ahmet Built* (2007) directed by Susan Steinberg at one of the venues.

### **Istanbul jazzed up**

The celebrations in the city started with a talk by Herbie Hancock, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, who is the leading figure behind the International Jazz Day project. In his written message for the day, Hancock stated: "The universal language of passion and benevolence, jazz continues to symbolize and nurture freedom and democracy." In his talk at the Galatasaray High School on the morning of 30 April, Hancock called on everybody to praise the capacity of music to build peace and bridges.

The day was busy with panel discussions, talks, film shows and even an exhibition opening at different venues before the concerts started in the evening at numerous venues. The highlight of the daytime activities was a panel discussion entitled *Jazz and Freedom* which was joined by Hugh Masekela (*pictured left*), Marcus Miller and Charlie Gans, and moderated by Yavuz Baydar. The event was marked particularly by the words of Marcus Miller, whose persona as a great rhetorician was heretofore unknown. Miller started by reminding attendees that in the times of slavery, slaves' only free day was Sunday and on that day they would gather together at the Congo square and play music.

He underlined that for the slaves, music was essential, a fact which Hugh Masekela expressed poetically: "We played to be human." Noting that "jazz is primarily a wordless music" which makes it universal, Miller emphasised that jazz "is a tool to communicate", "a democratic musical form" which has a "communal" aspect. Masekela added that music was the main catalyst in the civil rights movement. He said: "We grew up in boycotts, protests. There was no demonstration without singing. African-American people stood up against oppression through music". In the talk, Miller defined slavery as "the greatest tragedy" of humankind. He stated that it occurred across five continents and lasted longer than any other tragedy and noted that "jazz is about taking the negative and turning it into joyful". The speakers agreed that although it is wonderful that today there are young people who can grow up without having heard of segregation, it is crucial not to forget about those days and the struggle against it. Masekela also called attention to the reality that "jazz changed the English language".

### **Gala concert at Hagia Irene**

... And then there was the gala concert. The Byzantine church of Hagia Irene, which is used today as a concert hall for classical music as well as jazz, has a captivating ethereal atmosphere and superb acoustics, and so it was natural that this should be the venue of the concert. The night started with short talks by Herbie Hancock, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova and Turkey's Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ömer Çelik. The concert was streamed live via the web and projected on large screens in Caddebostan and Tepebaşı where jazz fans gathered together to enjoy this remarkable event communally. The concert featured pianists Herbie Hancock, John Beasley (Musical Director), George Duke, Robert Glasper, Ramsey Lewis, Keiko Matsui and Eddie Palmieri; vocalists Ruben Blades, Al Jarreau, Milton Nascimento, Dianne Reeves, Esperanza Spalding (who also played bass) and Joss Stone; trumpeters Terence Blanchard, Hugh Masekela and İmer Demirel (*the latter pictured above right*); bassists James Genus, Marcus Miller and Ben Williams; drummers Terri Lyne Carrington and Vinnie Colaiuta; guitarists Bilal Karaman, John McLaughlin, Lee Ritenour and Joe Louis Walker; saxophonists Dale Barlow, Igor Butman, Branford Marsalis, Wayne Shorter and Liu Yuan; clarinetists Anat Cohen and Hüsnü Şenlendirici; violinist Jean-Luc Ponty; Pedrito Martinez on percussion; tabla master Zakir Hussain; and trombonist Alevtina Polyakova.

Joss Stone and her band including Joe Louis Walker and Ramsey Lewis were the first on stage. Stone sang beautifully and illuminated the stage with her effortless charisma. After *Noble Cruise* by Eddie Palmieri and Terence Blanchard, Al Jarreau's singing of *Take Five* was followed by *Blue Rondo A La Turk* in which George Duke and Marcus Miller joined him. Dianne Reeves's rendition of *Tango* accompanied by Ben Williams, Zakir Hussain, Hüsnü Şenlendirici and Bilal Karaman was followed by an entertaining mini-speech by the Turkish stand-up showman Cem Yılmaz. After that, the band played *Isfahan* along with John Beasley and Terence Blanchard.

Thelonious Monk Jr. introduced *Travessia* after a short speech. The song was played by Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock and Esperanza Spalding. After that, John McLaughlin was on stage with the orchestra including Branford Marsalis and İmer Demirer playing *Resolution*. McLaughlin also played *Lotus Feet* with Zakir Hussain and Jean-Luc Ponty (*pictured left*). One of the unforgettable moments of the night was a short talk by a surprise guest: Martin Luther King III. He invoked his father's famous quote "Jazz speaks for life" which was received with great applause. Hugh Masekela's singing of *Stimela* backed by an orchestra including Herbie Hancock and John Beasley was greatly admired by the audience. The concert ended with *Night In Tunisia* performed by all the musicians participating in the concert.

As the night came to an end, there was a soft breeze in the yard of the ancient church packed with the echoes of unforgettable jazz tunes and calls for peace around the world. The road to freedom for black people of the world was paved with endless sorrow which was transformed into an extraordinary musical form, and this music today is the inspiration for the struggle for democratic rights all around the world, even more so than ever with the celebrations of International Jazz Day. It was an honour for Istanbul to share with the world the hospitality of the people of Turkey for such a meaningful occasion.

*N. Buket Cengiz (M.A., doctoral student) writes on popular culture for the national Turkish newspaper Radikal's Sunday supplement, Radikal İki, and works as a writing tutor at Kadir Has University's Writing Center in Istanbul. All photos by Mahmut Ceylan*

---

---