
International Jazz Day Artists Promote Inclusion, Cultural Connections in Paris

All-star gala event honoring Bill Clinton features Hancock, Shorter and others

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After leading a quintet through a scintillating rendition of his 1967 composition “The Sorcerer,” Herbie Hancock went to the podium at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris and spoke of the philosophical virtues of International Jazz Day (April 30), co-presented by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. The pianist and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador reiterated the celebration’s lofty themes of fostering cross-cultural dialogue, embracing personal and political freedom, and striving for global peace—touchstones that he had eloquently spoken of at the three previous International Jazz Day events.

This year, however, his words resonated with more emotional heft.

“Often, it’s just ... inches of earth geographically separating nations that are millions of miles apart philosophically, ethnically, religiously and culturally,” Hancock said. “Physically seeing neighbors across borders is easy—but uniting or even comprehending their divergent opinions or beliefs [can] seem impossible, sometimes hopeless, implausible and, unfortunately, often unimaginable.”

Considering the deadly terrorist attacks on the staff of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January—and the violent unrest in Baltimore regarding the death of Freddie Gray (who had been in police custody), which continued just days prior to International Jazz Day—Hancock’s words hung heavy as the audience listened silently. “International Jazz Day brings a beacon of hope into the mix,” Hancock continued, “because through the universal language [of] music, it brings large-scale opportunity to connect while listening to and respecting the intricate challenges facing our fellow man.”

The speeches touched upon the themes of unity and understanding, though no one at the event spoke about the Charlie Hebdo incidents, the Black Lives Matter sociopolitical movement in the States or any other specific atrocities around the world.

Nevertheless, the all-star concert, which celebrated the 70th anniversary of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), contained some sociopolitical messages intermittently through the music. “UNESCO [is] the house of peace. Tonight, this is the house of jazz,” Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, stated earlier in the evening. “Jazz means respecting the rights and dignity of every woman and man; jazz means courage, standing up for freedom, dignity and rights against hatred and discrimination. This is why UNESCO created International Jazz Day.”

Following more philosophical musing from Ban Ki-moon, the secretary-general of the United Nations, legendary South African trumpeter and social activist Hugh Masekela brought the house down with one of the evening’s more explicitly political tunes, “Mandela (Bring Him Back Home).” The celebratory spirit of that performance was book-ended by Nigerian singer and saxophonist Femi Kuti, who performed a riveting take of his song “No Place For My Dream,” toward the end of the concert. Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington and percussionist Mino Cinélu did a superb job handling the insistent rhythms.

Singer Annie Lennox’s forceful reading of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ “I Put A Spell On You” (which is on her Blue Note album, *Nostalgia*) brimmed with implied sociopolitical fervor, considering that she has used the song as a vehicle to address domestic violence against women.

Vocalist Dianne Reeves followed Lennox’s hair-raising performance with a dynamic revisit of “Mista,” a howling blues touching on themes of self-empowerment and personal responsibility.

Ideas concerning cross-cultural dialog were put into practice most dazzlingly during the performance of Tunisian singer and oud player Dhafer Youssef’s composition “Hayastan Dance.” Antonio Faraò began the performance with a sparse piano intro, on which Youssef sang wordless passages that rose from barely audible whispers to piercing cries. The song kicked into gear once Youssef began strumming an urgent dance-like ostinato figure on the oud. Wayne Shorter quickly joined

the fray by blowing skittering rhythms and swirling melodies on the soprano saxophone, while Carrington, Cinélu and bassist Ben Williams helped propel the momentum. When the commotion quelled briefly, Shorter and Youssef engaged in a graceful, improvised exchange that illustrated the noble principles of International Jazz Day.

The concert's most emotionally stirring moment arrived by way of vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater's enchanting rendering of Sacha Distel's 1962 song "La Belle Vie," during which she serenaded the audience with French lyrics and masterfully uncoiled the song's bittersweet themes. Grégoire Maret's pithy harmonica commentary provided the perfect counterpoint to Bridgewater's simmering vocals.

Similar to last year's International Jazz Day concert in Osaka, all the musicians gathered for a touching rendition of the John Lennon classic "Imagine" as the grand finale.

Afterward, the concert's musical director, John Beasley, mentioned that although there had been some interest in incorporating more pointed political songs into the program, participants had to take into account the concert's setting—as well as its global reach. "We had to [be mindful of] the house that we were in," Beasley explained. "The audience was mostly diplomats. So lyrically, we couldn't curse or sing about sex. Also, the entire world was going to be able to see the concert on web stream."

At the close of the show, Hancock announced that President Obama had agreed to host next year's International Jazz Day at the White House, which should make for an intriguing diplomatic interlude amid the 2016 presidential election season. It'll be interesting to see if next year's International Jazz Day will affect U.S. political discourse regarding social issues such as discrimination, civil rights and economic disparity.

In Paris, bassist and UNESCO Artist of Peace Marcus Miller was asked how musicians could take the philosophical ideals of International Jazz Day and incorporate them into practical, everyday activities. "Music can't solve everything," Miller replied. "But it really has made a big difference. The whole UNESCO thing is about communication. If you keep talking, you can make progress toward peace. I know that sounds corny, but it's really true."

—John Murph