

# Letter From Saint Petersburg

**In 2018, International Jazz Day brings the beyond-politics cultural diplomacy of the U.N. to Russia**



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By Evan Haga

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“You have to imagine peace, and work for it,” the arts producer and musician Hannibal Saad told me in the late evening of April 30. “Otherwise you become insane.” We were standing in the ballroom-style atrium of the Commandant’s House at the Peter and Paul Fortress in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Established by Peter the Great around the dawn of the 18th century and built over the next few decades, the fortress is arresting in its architectural

grandeur, like so much of Russia's cultural capital. A cast party for the 2018 International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert had begun to wane, and Saad was detailing the jazz-related entrepreneurship he undertook in his native Syria.

After gaining an education in the U.S., he "started the modern jazz movement in Syria in 2004," he said, which included a festival and collaborations with cultural organizations that fostered admission-free events in multiple cities. When the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, the festivals became impossible, so Saad, who currently lives in the Netherlands, funneled his energy into international benefit concerts for Syrian refugees, children and musicians. He also cleverly deployed technology to raise awareness, including an online video campaign, dubbed #4Syria, that asked musicians to perform and record something in dedication to the nation's suffering, devoid of politics. "I thought, 'This should be done now, not when the war ends,'" Saad explained. "And that worked, because usually when there is polarity, people tend to join the polarity, and the people in the middle, they disappear." International Jazz Day, co-organized by the United Nations' UNESCO agency and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and held globally each year since 2012, became an essential ally in his work, touting a humanitarian ethos he'd already adopted. "Somehow you have to find common ground, and I thought music can do that."



The Global Concert closes with John Lennon's "Imagine" (photo by Steve Munding/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

Earlier that day, Saad had related similar thoughts on a panel session featuring other dedicated IJD organizers in unlikely or difficult locales. Pianist Danilo Pérez talked about teaching music in his native Panama, in communities where crime and gang culture have upended young musicians' families. Shon Campbell, an Australian aid worker and jazz vocalist living and working in Myanmar, spoke of the challenges of introducing jazz initiatives into a culture with very little historical involvement with the music; nevertheless, she explained, the free IJD concerts she's presented have resonated with the locals, as photos reiterated. In her segment, Khouloud Soula, the president of the Jazz Club de Tunis, gave a presentation on her organization's yearlong schedule of regular workshops, master classes from visiting artists and performance opportunities for Tunisian players. Soula told

me later about the extent of those opportunities, whose comprehensiveness resembles that of a well-heeled commission program—guiding musicians from the inception of a concert idea through research, rehearsals, marketing, performance and documentation. “The biggest event that we organize every year is International Jazz Day,” she told me, “and that’s something that people have come to expect from us—that each year we make a fuss over [IJD].”

Elsewhere that day inside Mariinsky II, a theater complex harboring an extraordinary modern opera house, Russian student musicians ping-ponged among other sharply organized panels and programs. A discussion titled “Women in Jazz,” featuring Campbell as well as the genre-melding Russian musician Alina Rostotskaya and the brilliant Malian singer-songwriter Fatoumata Diawara, pointed up how women’s rights and involvement in the arts are, across the world, very much on a sliding scale.

The Monk Institute first traveled to Saint Petersburg in May of 2012, when Jazz Day’s architect and catalyst, pianist and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock, and singer Dee Dee Bridgewater helmed a Russian tour featuring Institute alumni and offering concerts and master classes. The organization was again a vital presence this year. An afternoon performance critique of young musicians by Institute players generated real insight. Trombonist Jon Hatamiya was challenged to coach an already thoroughly developed trio led by pianist Matt Voynarovsky, but he came up with pertinent advice: He encouraged the players to move out of their midcentury soloist-v.-rhythm-section roles and become more interactive, making use of the fluidity between melody, harmony and rhythm that has marked great piano trios post-Bill Evans. Other engaging panels occurred the day prior at the Saint Petersburg State Jazz Philharmonic Hall, along with long schedules of free music around town and nighttime events at local clubs.

International Jazz Day has become a successful and high-profile initiative for UNESCO, and more than 190 nations now participate. A jazz-history buff might be tempted to place it alongside the Jazz Ambassador tours undertaken by Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman and others during the thick of the Cold War, but those analogies only go so far. In one respect, IJD continues the interlanguage work that those journeys began, and it’s hard to deny the impact the earlier visiting Americans had on the cultural history of their destinations, including the U.S.S.R. (IJD is very much proof of how profoundly those midcentury seeds—along with the ones planted by Willis Conover’s Voice of America broadcasts—have grown.) On the other hand, the Jazz Ambassadors were clearly and purposefully cultural soldiers, out to negate Red propaganda and win hearts and minds.

A more unfettered idea of universal goodwill via music is what defines this event, whose centerpiece is the Global All-Star Concert. Held generally for invited guests in the given host city and webcast at [JazzDay.com](http://JazzDay.com), it tends to eclipse the outreach component in the press department. That’s not surprising: When the Obamas hosted IJD at the White House in 2016, Aretha Franklin sang “Purple Rain” in tribute to Prince, and Sting, introduced by Helen Mirren, fronted a band featuring Hancock and Pat Metheny. If that isn’t soundbite material, I don’t know what is.

In Saint Petersburg, the main-event concert was thoroughly enjoyable because it took a step back from stages overstuffed with big jazz names and crossover artists; often, it seemed to let its far-reaching Rolodex of players simply do what they do in more compact ensemble formats. The concert was crafted by returning musical director (and keyboardist) John Beasley, with Hancock and Russia’s most important jazz musician, the saxophonist Igor Butman, serving as co-artistic directors. And while I’ve suspected other host nations of viewing the concert as an opportunity to stack the deck, Butman opted for a *laissez-faire* approach that no doubt contributed to the show’s welcome sense of space, as well as its ability to showcase Russian talent in a way that felt organic and served the greater global

purpose. “I know John Beasley; I know Herbie. I know they’ve done years of great performances,” he told me in an interview at the cast party. “I didn’t want to get involved with that, because it’s their job, really. I didn’t want to say, ‘Oh, you’re in Russia—you have to do this.’”



The Manhattan Transfer opens the Global Concert backed by the Igor Butman-led Moscow Jazz Orchestra (photo by Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

Still, Russia made its presence known from the top. Butman’s Moscow Jazz Orchestra, an adaptable, beyond-tight big band that can bring to mind ’70s-era large ensembles led by Buddy Rich and Maynard Ferguson, backed the Manhattan Transfer on “Birdland.” Oleg Akkuratov, a blind 28-year-old pianist and singer in the young-Harry-Connick mold, charmed with “It Could Happen to You.” Another young Russian pianist and singer, Natalia Smirnova, piled theatrical emotionality onto “My One and Only Love”; Butman, whose brother Oleg occupied the drum throne on a couple of tunes, offered some of the best playing of the evening with his romantically virtuosic filigree around Smirnova’s voice. On “In a Sentimental Mood,” multi-instrumentalist David Goloschekin played gorgeous vocal textures on violin to complement Dianne Reeves.

Other highlights fell closer to the stuff of the American festival and concert-hall circuit: Joey DeFrancesco positively attacking the B-3 on “Down by the Riverside”; Robert Glasper and Terri Lyne Carrington bringing a neo-soul vibe to “Stella by Starlight”; Luciana Souza and Lee Ritenour navigating a Brazil-by-way-of-L.A. aesthetic on Gilberto Gil’s “Eu Vim da Bahia”; the casually killing hookup between Branford Marsalis and Kurt Elling; Rudresh Mahanthappa breathing bop fire into Hancock’s “Actual Proof”; the artful phrasing of Gilad Hekselman, awash in volume swells; the secret-weapon bass mastery of Ben Williams and James Genus.



Oleg Akkuratov performs at the Global Concert (photo by Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

In the Global Concert's not-infrequent speechifying, in that show's customary finale of John Lennon's "Imagine" and throughout its receptions and panels, IJD has held up the almost vehemently apolitical language and demeanor that you'd expect from the cultural-diplomacy arm of the U.N. For an American visiting Russia in the spring of 2018, that could feel at times like letting the elephant have the room to itself. But then you remember that all of global geopolitics is not that day's Trump-related cable-news flashpoint, and you recall the performances you heard by the Japanese pianist Makoto Ozone, or the Gnawa funk of *sintir* player Hassan Hakmoun, or the twentysomething beboppers at the hip local club the Hat, young musicians whose fearsome talent no doubt descends from the rigors of Russia's centuries-old classical traditions. Or you think about Hannibal Saad, from Syria, or Shon Campbell, in Myanmar. As for the musicians, the predominant attitude was upbeat and unfazed. "It's troubled times every place, man," Kurt Elling told me. "I've [performed] in a whole bunch of trouble zones. I've been to Israel to play when the shit's going down. Just being in New York shortly after 9/11. ... I had a record release that happened the Saturday after the Tuesday of 9/11. ... [That] was really an opportunity for me and everybody who showed up to be together and to feel better."

As former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova recalled to me, International Jazz Day's success in cultural diplomacy began in 2011, before the event even existed. Back then it was an extraordinarily popular draft resolution, quickly adopted even by nations that made, as Bokova put it, "most unusual allies." Since then it's been centered in cities that political observers wouldn't call carefree—Istanbul, Havana—but, as Bokova explained, the U.N. wouldn't have it any other way. "I know sometimes things are very political and it's very difficult to work in certain circumstances, but I think history will not pardon us if we don't try to do it," she said. "We need to protect the heritage in conflict areas, under difficult political circumstances. We just have to work it out. And I think jazz is one of the ways to do it."

"We have to have some doors open," she'd said earlier, "if not to the high political leaders, then to the civil society, to the intellectuals, musicians, writers." When I brought up the

criticism that the U.N. could be seen as rewarding dysfunctional governments with such a grand event, her answer was instantaneous. “This is not for the government; it’s for the people,” she said, with force but not indignation. “And I think this powerful message, the city lives with it. It’s the message to the people—the message about freedom, the message about dignity, the message about intercultural dialogue.”

At the 2018 event in Saint Petersburg, perhaps no one embodied the joys and challenges of cultural diplomacy more convincingly than Igor Butman, an IJD veteran and the most famous Russian jazz musician in the world. From the standpoint of jazz craft, that reputation isn’t undeserved. The tenor saxophonist harbors an impressively broad skillset and a sterling tone that can summon up Michael Brecker or even Chris Potter; like those musicians, his style brushes up against various touchstones of jazz saxophone history, delivering them with an exquisitely precise technique that might best be called post-fusion. But the analogy most often applied to Butman is that he’s the Russian version of his friend and collaborator Wynton Marsalis: the leader of a renowned big band; a valuable media spokesperson; a founder and director of venues and events; a jazz advocate whose experience, charm, connections and sense of responsibility can facilitate big opportunities for the music. In his homeland he’s a cultural celebrity, and his hero’s welcome was rivaled throughout the weekend only by the applause that greeted Hancock. But Butman is also exceedingly approachable, and he sat outside the Global Concert’s cast party, cigar in hand, for a brief interview that was interrupted constantly by well-wishers.

Butman was born in Saint Petersburg in 1961, when the city was called Leningrad, and his story contains the details you might expect in that of an ambitious young musician coming of age in the late Soviet era, after the Khrushchev Thaw had opened new doors to jazz culture. There were classical studies on clarinet, with an official switch to jazz saxophone as a teenager. Mentorships exposed him to everything from bop to Anthony Braxton to Weather Report, and while he was paying dues in the Soviet Union’s acclaimed big bands, his profile rose in a way that allowed him to meet and sit in with visiting American greats. He became something of a protégé to Grover Washington Jr., whose R&B-infused phrasing can still be heard in Butman’s playing.

He eventually emigrated to the U.S., and became a student at Berklee in the mid-to-late ’80s. “I’m not a Communist,” he told me. “I didn’t want to be in the Soviet Union because I didn’t have the freedom that I wanted to have. I didn’t want to fight the regime, because some people were happy with that regime. ... So I left.” His career progressed fruitfully in the States throughout the first half of the ’90s, but by the middle of the decade Butman felt the pull homeward. Since then he’s worked steadily from Moscow at the axis of performer, ambassador and entrepreneur, with ballast provided by friends like Vladimir Putin, whom Butman met early in the president’s political career. (“We don’t see each other every day, but we play hockey sometimes; he invites me to perform,” Butman said.) In his bestselling autobiography, Bill Clinton praises Butman while detailing his presidential travels during the spring of 2000—a dispatch from simpler times: *Before I left Moscow, Putin hosted a small dinner in the Kremlin with a jazz concert afterward, featuring Russian musicians from teenagers to an octogenarian. The finale began on a dark stage, a haunting series of tunes by my favorite living tenor saxophonist, Igor Butman. John Podesta, who loved jazz as much as I did, agreed with me that we had never heard a finer live performance.*

“When I [returned], I got support here,” Butman explained. “I could bring my American friends to play for a great audience. I could play in the United States. I put together my band; I was very proud of the talent of the musicians. That’s why I thought maybe I’ll stay here, and do something for Russia, and for the United States, and for the whole world.”



Igor Butman in Saint Petersburg in April (photo by Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

Still, Butman's music-first diplomacy hasn't gone untested. He was quick to point out the transparency of his situation, how his high-ranking associates in Moscow "all know I have American citizenship"—though that might not appease all of the Kremlin's opposition in Russia, and at least one pundit has publicly condemned his dual citizenship as disloyalty. While he does enjoy prominence in United Russia, the nation's current ruling party, he said

he's chosen to avoid any official government jobs that would require him to relinquish his U.S. passport. "I can do a better job as a musician, and organizing and producing music festivals, than I would as a minister of culture," Butman said.

"It's not easy," he explained later. "Some positions I was offered, I couldn't be in that position because I'm an American citizen as well. But I asked a few people, 'Do you want me to surrender my citizenship?' Very important people, I asked. ... People respect me for my beliefs."

In the summer of 2015, the U.S. State Department warned Butman against performing at the Koktebel Jazz Party, founded by the provocative Russian journalist Dmitry Kiselev and held in the storied artist colony in Russian-occupied Crimea. Again, Butman invoked the idea that music can and should supersede politics. "In the worst times in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union," he began, "which were much worse than now, because of the ideology: communism against capitalism ... jazz music was always an American art form we enjoyed and played ... and it's the art of freedom. And then [when] they say you can't play—it doesn't matter where. It's music, and people in Crimea, even if they're under a Russian regime, or a Ukrainian regime, or any [other regime], they want to hear music." (It's worth noting that, per the Monk Institute, the State Department provided consistent support for International Jazz Day in Saint Petersburg, just as it's important to point out that in 2014, Butman's signature, along with the signatures of hundreds of other Russian artists and thinkers, reportedly appeared on a controversial petition of support for the annexation of Crimea.)

After that first message was received, Butman wrote a response to President Obama, which yielded a second notice from the States, this one's position unmoved. The saxophonist had been an integral part of, and inspiration for, the Koktebel event since its beginning, he reiterated to me. "I couldn't say no to the promoter. I couldn't say no to the people in Crimea," Butman said. "I couldn't."

"It's not that I'm Putin's moppet, as people say to me," he continued. "Do I love President Putin? Yes, I do, as a person. I know him well. I want peace on Earth. I want everybody to be happy. ... What can I do? Should I extend the hate? Can I be on this side or that side? ... No, I'm going to play music."

The 2019 festivities, anchored in Sydney, Australia, will mark the first International Jazz Day following the U.S.'s exit from UNESCO this coming December. The Trump administration made that announcement last October, citing issues including a "continuing anti-Israel bias" in a press statement, though the nation will remain affiliated as a "non-member observer state." With regard to IJD, it's essential to remember that the initiative has thrived since its start in 2012—the year after the U.S. pulled its funding from UNESCO, following Palestine's admittance as a full member.

The Sydney program will proceed in part under the leadership of that continent's own Wynton-style ambassador, the trumpeter James Morrison, whose prodigious chops have been a staple of the IJD Global Concerts. In Saint Petersburg, we talked about his vision for the 2019 event. "One thing is that we have a huge engagement with youth in Australia," he said. "There's a lot of young people into jazz." To start, schoolchildren across the country have been given an assignment, to compose a melody in honor of IJD, and the winning tune will be professionally arranged and become the 2019 IJD theme song. Morrison also plans to honor Australia's indigenous population, and mentioned Hakmoun's *sintir* grooves at the Mariinsky as an example of how to work music that extends beyond jazz's borders into the lineup.





The great Australian trumpeter James Morrison, seen here with bassist Ben Williams and drummer Oleg Butman, will help helm IJD 2019 in Sydney (photo by Steve Munding/Theonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the continent's national broadcaster, has signed on to deliver the Global Concert across media platforms, and satellite concerts around Australia will end with a screening of the all-star show. Those ancillary activities will be essential to showcasing the breadth of his country's jazz tradition, Morrison said. And he was already anticipating the headaches of deciding which native musicians will make the Global Concert cut. "If you can fit everyone into one concert, you don't have much of a jazz scene," he said with a chuckle.

*This story was updated on May 25.*