

# Saturday Conversation: Herbie Hancock On International Jazz Day, What Jazz Means To Him, AI And More

**Steve Baltin**

Senior Contributor

Apr 29, 2023, 05:32pm EDT



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA - JANUARY 26: Herbie Hancock attends the Los Angeles Red Carpet Premiere ...FILMMAGIC

Tomorrow, April 30, is International Jazz Day, a world holiday for a jazz legend such as Herbie Hancock. And Hancock is treating it as such, hosting an international party to celebrate the music he has loved his whole life.

"Herbie Hancock will take viewers on an international tour of sights and sounds showcasing jazz in all its diversity. The concert will feature performances from Beijing, China; Beirut, Lebanon; Casablanca, Morocco; Johannesburg, South Africa; Marondera, Zimbabwe; Paris, France; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil;

Vienna, Austria; and Fairbanks, Honolulu, New York, San Francisco and Washington, DC, USA," according to a press release.

The all-star concert, starting at four EST and one PST, will feature Sergio Mendes, Christian McBride, Dianne Reeves, Marcus Miller, Melody Gardot, Dee Dee Bridgewater and countless others. It will be live streamed on [jazzday.com](http://jazzday.com), [unesco.org](http://unesco.org), [hancockinstitute.org](http://hancockinstitute.org), the International Jazz Day [YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#) channels, and other outlets.

Hancock generously agreed to talk about his love of jazz, what jazz means to him and much more, including technology, AI, spirituality and much more for a fascinating conversation.

**Steve Baltin: Since we're talking about International Jazz Day, what is jazz music to you?**

**Herbie Hancock: Jazz is a music for anybody to be able to not only express themselves as individuals, but to express themselves within a collective of musicians. Yes, you can play**

solo but you can also play within a group. It allows you to compose over whatever the group has decided upon to be able to compose, so it's a conversation in a way, but an artistic conversation. And it's supportive of each of the individuals that's involved, even if you don't like them. But your responsibility automatically, because it's just built into the fiber of jazz, is to enhance what anybody does, even if you don't like what they played [chuckle]. You try to make everything fit, try to make everything be a piece of the puzzle, if you will. There's a lot more that I can explain. It's also about freedom, as I said, it's very democratic. Those are some of the hallmarks, I guess, of jazz, and it's fun to play.

**Sage Bava: I'd love to hear the future of where you think this music is going with AI, but also our collective want in returning to realness, returning to real instruments.**

Hancock: Yeah, I think we're living in that time right now, where technology is advancing so much faster. And I'm a nerd. I loved technology ever since I was a child. Anyway, it is advancing further than I have ever expected in my whole life. And with that speed of advancement and the level of advancement, there are a lot of questions and issues at stake. Some of the horror movies that we've seen in the past, like *Terminator*, those things are not impossible anymore, so this is why we really need to figure out how to build a sense of ethics, like a humanitarian sense, something having to do with our sense of good and bad, distinguishing between the two because machines don't have that. That doesn't mean that they won't be able to have that included. But we have to be careful.

We do have to beware of the possible dangers but the cat's out of the bag now and it can be such a boon to almost any field, but it's going to change the trajectory of what human beings do because they will impact a multitude of jobs and pursuits. But the best thing that we can do when it's available is to work with it, and maybe through that, AI can develop a sense of what the human spirit ultimately is. And so I think the future has a bright side, a very bright side. At the same time, sometimes you have to take the good with the bad.

In Buddhism, I'm a Buddhist. And with SGI, that's the Buddhist organization I belong to, we believe in the value of not only the wonderful things, but there's value in the poisonous things too. We say "Turning poison into medicine so that all of it winds up actually being helpful." And that has to be applied to AI, that kind of sense. If we weren't able to turn poison into medicine, we would never learn anything. That's how we learned to walk, not only by studying what adults do in walking, but also by falling on our faces and scraping up our chins. But what are human beings? They get up and try it again, over and over again. I've learned a lot from criticism, that's something we can learn a lot from too. Anyway I could go on and on about this subject.

**Baltin: Do you feel like you've enjoyed music more once you realized that it's a byproduct of who you are as opposed to being just a musician?**

Hancock: I had already been enjoying music by that time, and, yes, it was enhanced by that realization, but it also pulled the blinders off of me to be able to explore other territories that came my way. And a lot of things that I'm working on personally now are not confined to the category of playing music or writing music.

One of my main interests is technology, and we're talking about AI. I've been looking at a lot of YouTube videos about AI, and in a lot of different ways, but I'm also very concerned about the caveats. If introducing AI to the general public and having it being able to read everything that's online and absorb that, including social media, music [and] pretty much everything that human beings do.

I'm concerned about people being replaced by machines. That's happened in the past. What happened to the people that used to make the shoes for horses? They were out of job, they had to take another job. Those kinds of situations have happened before but this is another level of that, and we have to be very careful about what those areas can be and the difficulties that are contained in those areas. Like just giving a person a living wage is not going to cause a person all of a sudden to just become happy. A lot of people love their jobs, a lot of people have been devoted to their jobs, and the idea of retraining them to some other kinds of pursuits still hasn't really been discussed that much within the governing bodies of America.

So, there are a lot of things that we're behind at getting to and there are a lot of things that have gotten in the way too. That is, our own greed gets in the way of us being able to deal with the realities of life. Look at climate change and how greed has slowed us down from being able to successfully deal with that problem. We've got to reach some benchmarks, and the slower we are at getting there, the more difficult it's going to be on the back end of it.

I've got a grandson that I'm concerned about, what is his life going to be about? He's two years old now. What kind of planet are we leaving for him? There are so many things that need to be dealt with. We need to deal with the things that are built into our own constitution that was made back in the day when they had muskets. What are we doing with military gear in the hands of public, with children having rifles? We haven't dealt properly with the things that are right in front of our faces, be concerned, be concerned.

### **Baltin: What do you want people to take from Jazz Day?**

Hancock: I just want people to enjoy it, to be happy, they're hearing it, to be astounded and to not only brighten their day but brighten their year and have them look forward to seeing and experiencing the joy of International Jazz Day every year.

But another aspect of it is that it also contains musicians from all over the planet, and that one day, whether you are Chinese, Russian, Vietnamese, Thai, American, European, Brazilian, Turkish, whatever you may be, even though the governments may have been in agreement with everything or they may be even at war, on that one day with that music, we are functioning as a planet that works together because I think we have close to 195 countries that will be actually doing something on International Jazz Day pertaining to jazz.

On this particular day, we got amazing people. Diane Reeves is going to be singing, Marcus Miller is performing on bass. Christian McBride is another bass player, Sérgio Mendes is doing something. Dee Dee Bridgewater, Melody Gardot, John Beasley, so many people are going to be doing it on the worldwide telecast and the webcast because we're not going to be able to show all of the performers in all the countries because it's so many countries.

We have pages and pages of celebrations that will be happening throughout, take Italy, for example. They sent us pages and pages of data about how, throughout the country they will be celebrating International Jazz Day and the different performances and other activities that they'll have on that date pertaining to jazz. We've even had things in North Korea.

**Bava: My favorite topic to discuss is spirituality and music, and I'm trying to do a deep dive on the subject. I'm curious if you have any favorite books, thinkers, researchers that you feel are really taking the baton in creating works around spirituality and music?**

Hancock: My life mentor is a man named Daisaku Ikeda, he's a Japanese man, he is the president, the mentor really of anybody who does this practice of Buddhism with Soka Gakkai International or SGI. He writes tons of books that are about Buddha, about the practice that we do and why we do it. If it brings you happiness, you would automatically want to share it with somebody else. And that actually is part of the practice, is let the other people know that it exists so that they can help themselves to move forward in life no matter how many things are trying to push them back. So actually, I would suggest going on the website. In America, it is SGI USA and seeing what's there, but as I said, it's practiced in other countries, so SGI will lead them to the website that's in that particular country.

**Bava: What else do you want people to know about International Jazz Day?**

Hancock: One thing is, I want to thank the Doris Duke Foundation being one of the funders for International Jazz Day and the Ford Foundation too, and also United Airlines, which is providing not only transportation, but they're also providing us with monetary funding too, so that's of course important to us.

I needed to actually write some of these facts down. Each year, the International Jazz Day programs have reached more than 2 billion people worldwide through not just the performances. But also, we have education programs, we have community outreach programs, radio, television, streaming, and electronic print and social media, that's a lot of people. One more thing I just wanted to add, and that is, International Jazz Day is actually an activity that's really birthed by UNESCO and the UN. And the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz works in a partnership with the UN and UNESCO in creating and producing, International Jazz Day and all of its functions.

The reason it's International Jazz Day is because it used to be that Americans were always just the best jazz musicians. Not so much anymore, now they have amazing jazz musicians all over the world. So when I became goodwill ambassador to UNESCO, the first thing I said was, "The United States wants to give jazz to the world, although jazz was born in America, it now officially belongs to the world."