

Havana Named as Host City for 2017 International Jazz Day

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

APR. 10, 2017, 8:01 A.M. E.D.T.

NEW YORK —Herbie Hancock has twice before visited Havana to perform intimate solo-duet concerts with his Cuban counterpart Chucho Valdes, but at the end of April the two renowned jazz pianists will be collaborating on a grander scale.

Hancock and Valdes will be serving as artistic directors for the 6th International Jazz Day. On Monday, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization announced that Havana will be the global host city for the event, culminating with an all-star concert on April 30 at the recently renovated 19th-century Gran Teatro de La Habana. The concert will be broadcast live on Cuban television and live streamed by UNESCO.

Last year, Washington was the host city with President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama hosting the global concert at the White House.

"Many times we think of Cuba as having great baseball players, which they do, but they have amazing jazz players and we've experienced the greatness of Cuban jazz musicians for many, many decades," Hancock, a UNESCO goodwill ambassador, said in a telephone interview. "I'm hoping that the true creative spirit and artistry of the Cuban musicians will be recognized globally."

Hancock will be bringing about two dozen international jazz artists to Cuba. The roster includes Americans such as singers Cassandra Wilson and Kurt Elling, violinist Regina Carter, bassist Marcus Miller and bassist-singer Esperanza Spalding as well as saxophonist Igor Butman (Russia), trumpeters Till Bronner (Germany) and Takuya Kuroda (Japan), drummer Antonio Sanchez (Mexico) and oud player Dhafer Youssef (Tunisia).

Unlike previous International Jazz Days outside the U.S. when the host country was represented by only a few musicians, at least 29 Cubans will be performing at the concert, including veterans such as pianists Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Bobby Carcasses and younger musicians like trumpeter Julio Padron and pianist Alfredo Rodriguez.

"I expect International Jazz Day to be an historic event in Cuba. All the Cuban musicians are really excited because it's a dream come true for many of them," said Valdes, interviewed by phone from his Florida home, with his remarks in Spanish translated by his wife.

Valdes called it the "most significant" jazz event in Cuba since the 1979 Havana Jam when CBS Records brought American jazz and pop stars, including jazz-rock band Weather Report, for a three-day festival that also featured top Cuban ensembles, including Valdes' Irakere that fused modern jazz with Afro-Cuban influences.

A year earlier, Irakere had become the first Cuban jazz band to play in the U.S. since Fidel Castro's rise to power, performing at the Newport-New York Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall in New York City and recording a Grammy-winning album. Hancock and Valdes say the links between American and Cuban musicians go back nearly a century to when New Orleans pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton referred to the "Spanish tinge" in the new music. The connection reached new heights in the 1940s when bebop trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie brought Afro-Cuban percussionist Chano Pozo into his band to create Latin-flavored compositions.

Thomas R. Carter, president of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, which organized the program in partnership with the Cuban Institute of Music and Ministry of Culture, said the Cuban side wanted to expand the event from its usual one or two days to an entire week starting April 24 emphasizing jazz education.

A documentary film on jazz history will be shown in 11,000 Cuban schools followed by classroom discussions. The international all-stars will be presenting workshops and master classes at Havana-area schools and perform at hospitals and senior centers. There will also be performances at Havana jazz clubs and several smaller concerts, including one for students in the recently flooded Guanabacoa district.

International Jazz Day will also be celebrated again in more than 190 countries and on all seven continents, including Antarctica where scientists at the Palmer and McMurdo polar stations will be holding a jam session, Carter said.