

New Orleans concert marks International Jazz Day

By STACEY PLAISANCE

NEW ORLEANS

As the morning sun spilled over the New Orleans' skyline Monday, jazz musicians Herbie Hancock, Ellis Marsalis and others kicked off International Jazz Day with a sunrise concert that included ritual drumming and a string of performances, a day that culminated in the evening with a grand all-star concert at the United Nations.

In the morning, trumpeters Terence Blanchard and Kermit Ruffins, singer Stephanie Jordan and others performed "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and "Afro Blue" as the sun rose on Congo Square, an area near the French Quarter neighborhood where slaves once gathered on Sundays to play music.

Hundreds crowded the stage, some dancing and waving white handkerchiefs to the music.

Several hours later, amid the backdrop of the U.N.'s General Assembly Hall, Hancock joined other jazz luminaries, including Marsalis' son Wynton, Tony Bennett and Quincy Jones, for a concert that paid tribute to the best in jazz as well as its musical inspirations and influences. Besides jazz, there was blues, world music, a bit of R&B and more genres represented, with performances that included Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, Angelique Kidjo, Robert Cray, and Dee Dee Bridgewater, and appearances from Robert De Niro, Morgan Freeman and Michael Douglas.

"Jazz ... that's America's only true indigenous art form," said Jones. "It's our classical music, you've got to remember that."

"It's the heart and soul of American music and we can't afford to let it slip into obscurity," he added.

International Jazz Day was launched in Paris on Friday by the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in partnership with the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, of which Hancock is chairman. The Paris event included roundtable discussions, improvisational workshops and performances by artists from various countries.

"Jazz is something very special, and it belongs to the world," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, who traveled from Paris to New Orleans for Monday's sunrise concert. "Jazz music is an expression of freedom, of human rights and of human dignity."

Still, the genre's roots cannot be denied, Hancock said. Jazz was born out of slavery, "the positive and creative response to slavery to elevate and lift the hearts of the slaves," he said.

"It really touches people's hearts because they can identify and feel the sense of hope and voice of freedom that really comes from jazz," Hancock said. "This is what makes it truly international."

In all, thousands across the globe were expected to participate in International Jazz Day at events in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Japan, Algeria, New Guinea, Russia and elsewhere.

"This is the international celebration of jazz, which in a sense, is a loss for America because UNESCO is proclaiming that jazz is not just American," Hancock said.

"But it's been international from the very beginning," he said, citing Africa and Europe as influences for jazz music.

Jordan, who replaced Dianne Reeves in Monday's lineup after Reeves had a family emergency,

said she was honored to be asked to join the celebration.

"Jazz is the most inclusive music we have," the New Orleans-born singer said. "It crosses all barriers. It transcends race and economics. ... I'm so glad that the world recognizes how great this music is, the tradition, and keeping it alive."

Ruffins said it was fitting that the United States launched its celebration of jazz in Congo Square.

"It's almost like we're standing in the heart, the birthplace of jazz, where the slaves used to come and celebrate on Sundays and create this beautiful culture that we have in the city today," he said.

Today, Congo Square is part of Armstrong Park, a public green space with fountains, statues of musicians and lush tropical gardens. The park is named for Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, one of the city's founding fathers of jazz.

Hancock performed his funky standard "Watermelon Man" with high school students from around the world via an Internet link. Then he flew to New York for the sunset concert. Among the highlights of that concert was South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela joining Wonder on Masekela's "Grazing in the Grass," while Kidjo danced in the aisles of the General Assembly as she led the audience in the song "Afrika."

For Hancock, the two concerts symbolize the jazz globalization he has observed since he launched his career a half century ago.

As Monk Institute chairman, Hancock has seen more foreign musicians selected as finalists in its yearly competitions as well as fellows for its two-year jazz performance college program at UCLA. The fellows include guitarist Lionel Loueke from Benin, who's now a member of Hancock's quartet.

Hancock's 2010 CD, the double Grammy-winning "The Imagine Project," features pop and world music stars from 10 countries. He and Ruffins are also scheduled to perform this weekend at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which runs Thursday through Sunday.

AP Music Writer Nekesa Mumbi Moody contributed to this report from New York.