

Jazz Articles: International Jazz Day a Hit on April 30

By Evan Haga & Jeff Tamarkin

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Hancock, Blanchard, Bennett, De Niro and more at concerts in NOLA and NYC

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If you were out and about absorbing music in New Orleans on Sunday night, you probably heard the following query more than once: “Are you staying up for Herbie’s show?” The gig in question was the sunrise kick-off to International Jazz Day, an initiative presented by UNESCO (which last year named Herbie Hancock a Goodwill Ambassador) in partnership with the Thelonious Monk Institute. A second Jazz Day show would take place that evening in New York; both were streamed live online.

Held in historic Congo Square with a start-time of 7 a.m., the roughly hour-long NOLA component was open to the public and favored music to speeches. There were remarks from host Harry Shearer, Hancock, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu and others, but most of the running time was devoted to the tunes. (UNESCO general-director Irina Bokova’s speech, with its sentiments about how “jazz was born [in the U.S.] but now belongs to the world,” hit hardest.)

After an overture provided by the Congo Square Preservation Society, members of the Treme brass band plus a frontline of trumpeter Kermit Ruffins and clarinetist Dr. Michael White got things rolling with “Canal St. Blues” and a couple choruses of “Saints.” Hancock and a student quintet driven by the precociously confident drummer Michael Mitchell tackled “Watermelon Man.” (Student groups around the world were encouraged to record their own performances of that tune and submit the video footage to jazzday.com.) “A Night in Tunisia,” with Hancock, White, trumpeter Terence Blanchard, bassist Roland Guerin, drummer Jeff “Tain” Watts and percussionist Bill Summers, took on a JALC-like arrangement, looser than its early bop origins and split between swing and Afro-Cuban sections. Other highlights included Stephanie Jordan’s R&B-tinted “On a Clear Day” with Ellis Marsalis in the piano chair; Ruffins lending his characterful rasp to “On the Sunny Side of the Street”; and the Treme Brass Band’s closing rendition of John Boutté’s “Treme Song.” As Hancock promised, International Jazz Day was shaping up to “be a day you will remember forever,” and it was only just beginning.

New York City has always been home to the world’s most storied jazz venues, from Minton’s Playhouse and the Cotton Club of decades past to the Blue Note and Village Vanguard of today. Until now, no one would ever have thought to place the General Assembly of the United Nations—that august room where policies affecting the world are made—on that list. But on the night of April 30, there was no better place in New York—or the rest of the planet—to hear jazz. The “Sunset Concert” closing out the first annual International Jazz Day, following earlier events in Paris and New Orleans, was a star-studded affair—the hosts were Morgan Freeman, Robert De Niro, Michael Douglas and Quincy Jones—but it was also a phenomenal jazz concert.

Following a videotaped welcome by U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, during which he got his Miles on by noting that “The U.N. flag is kind of blue” and dropped the titles of several other jazz tunes and albums, Tony Bennett led off the program proper with a stellar three-song set. The

invitation-only audience probably could have gone home happy right then and there, but a barrage of highlights was yet to come over the next two-and-a-half hours.

The program took the international part of International Jazz Day seriously. Presented by UNESCO (which last year named Herbie Hancock a Goodwill Ambassador) in partnership with the Thelonious Monk Institute, the New York gig spotlighted artists from every continent save Antarctica, mixing and matching them to satisfying and sometimes surprising effect. With George Duke serving as musical director, a parade of players and singers performed tributes (to Miles, Ella, Trane, Louis, the blues, Latin jazz, etc.) and did what jazz artists do best: created spontaneously.

Among the standout segments: Esperanza Spalding mixing it up on “What a Wonderful World” with Jimmy Heath and, later, with Stevie Wonder on the standard “Midnight Sun”; Danilo Pérez, Joe Lovano, Richard Bona and Jack DeJohnette killing it on Monk’s “Think of One”; Wonder blowing harp alongside Hugh Masekela on the latter’s 1968 number one hit “Grazing in the Grass”; Miles’ second great quintet alumni Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Ron Carter plus DeJohnette nailing “Milestones”; Angelique Kidjo (backed by fellow Benin native Lionel Loueke on guitar) making her way down the aisles, getting the audience off its collective ass, temporarily, at least; the Howlin’ Wolf blues classic “How Many More Years” featuring Robert Cray, Derek Trucks and his wife Susan Tedeschi; and a great Latin percussionist feast with Sheila E., Bobby Sanabria and the 91-year-old Candido.

Mercifully, the speechifying was kept short (except for Quincy Jones’ rambling turn) and the music came at a steady pace. Wynton Marsalis made ample use of his mute on a note-perfect “St. James Infirmary,” accompanied only by bassist Christian McBride (who backed just about everyone this evening); Hancock and classical pianist Lang Lang were exquisite on their duet of *West Side Story*’s “Tonight”; another pianist, Japan’s Hiromi, was her usual virtuosic self accompanied by Terence Blanchard and Israeli saxophonist Eli Degibri; tabla great Zakir Hussain performed several times, one a take on Coltrane’s “India” that also featured Shorter, Bona, Lebanese pianist Tarek Yamani and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta; and singers Chaka Khan, Dee Dee Bridgewater and Shankar Mahadevan all dazzled.

There was a lot of talk, whenever a speaker came to the mic, about music being a “universal language.” It’s a cliché, but many clichés get to be that way because they’re true. These few dozen musicians from locales as far-flung as Cuba, China, the Netherlands, Colombia, South Africa and, yes, jazz’s birthplace, drove that point home again and again. Hancock promised there will be a second International Jazz Day next year. Hopefully, there will be a lot more after that.