

Saxophones sound from the UN to celebrate the unifying power of jazz

Alana Chloe Esposito | 05.06.2012

“What is jazz?” asked legendary trumpeter Quincy Jones at Monday night’s all-star concert in the General Assembly Hall of the UN. The occasion marked the first annual International Jazz Day designated by UNESCO, and conceived by its newest Goodwill Ambassador, Herbie Hancock, in collaboration with the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz.

Every dignitary and music and film-world luminary present –including co-hosts Morgan Freeman and Herbie Hancock, Tony Bennett, Michael Douglas, Robert DeNiro, Thelonius Monk Jr., and more — had their own answer for Jones, because jazz penetrates the human spirit and resonates in one’s core. It is this quality that earns jazz its reputation for bringing people together, making it an art form worthy of UN recognition as a vehicle for promoting peace and tolerance.

Sharing his own reflections, Jones described jazz as “a beautiful mistress who makes you do whatever you have to do to be with her!” On a more serious note, he added, “I’ve seen her power first hand – the power to make men forget their differences and come together...From the bottom of my heart I say jazz is the personification of transforming overwhelmingly negative circumstances into freedom, friendship, hope, and dignity.”

Jazz’s association with freedom ironically stems from its dark origins in the period following the American Civil War. “It was a marriage of two seemingly different cultures thrust together by the laws of Jim Crow,” Jones explained. The African vocal power and drum beats retained by the newly freed slaves, fused with European sounds coming from the mixed-race house servants, who introduced them to saxophones, clarinets, trumpets, and trombones. Thus born in the context of oppression, jazz transcended barriers of race and geography, not only becoming a universal language, but playing a role in various human rights struggles around the world.

As Herbie Hancock noted, “Gathering in this esteemed hall, where countries put aside their differences and unite for the betterment of humankind, symbolizes the power of all music to cross boundaries, making our world more equitable, secure, and peaceful.”

Delivering the opening remarks, Ambassador Susan Rice commented on jazz’s quintessentially American origins and early development. Whenever the U.S. wanted to show its best face abroad, it sent jazz musicians as cultural ambassadors, and jazz has since been adopted by all cultures. “Like democracy itself, jazz has structure, but within it you can say almost anything,” she added.

The global reach of jazz was reflected in the line-up of musicians, such as Hugh Masekala, known for his protest music against South Africa’s apartheid regime, and Hiromi Uehara from Japan, who was so engrossed in playing the piano that she was jumping up and down while her fingers never missed a beat on the keys. Grammy award winners hailing from Australia, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, China, Cuba, India, Japan, and the Netherlands played alongside Stevie Wonder, Wynton Marsalis, and other American masters.

During an earlier panel discussion on the theme “Unlearning Intolerance: Jazz as a Force for Education and Dialogue,” young musicians recounted personal stories about growing up listening to jazz with their foreign-born parents. “When I was three, my father would play Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald for me and take me to jazz clubs in Chicago to hear the same jazz tunes he had loved listening to growing up in Iraq,” explained Amir ElSaffar, an Iraqi-American who plays the trumpet and an ancient Babylonian instrument.

Following the discussion, a screening of the film “Finding Carlton” by the Indian filmmaker Susheel Kurien, chronicled the little-known history of Calcutta’s (and to a lesser extent Bombay’s) swinging jazz scene. Catching on while American soldiers were stationed in India during the First World War, jazz became the cultural epicenter of India’s English-speaking population. Eventually it spawned great Indian jazz musicians, some of whom uncannily captured the sounds of American legends, and some of whom fused it with traditional Indian sounds. This too, exemplifies the universality of jazz.

Stevie Wonder may have aroused the loudest applause of the night, but it was the enthusiasm of the Beninise singer-songwriter Angélique Kidjo that got the audience up dancing and singing (in an African dialect, no less). “Jazz has its roots in Africa... and tonight we are all Africans,” she told the audience to thunderous applause.

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