

Meet The Man Who Assembles The World's Biggest Jazz Concert

From NPR Jazz

a blog **supreme**

The pianist and composer [John Beasley](#) has one of the most formidable tasks of anyone associated with today's [International Jazz Day](#), the celebration produced by UNESCO and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. He's music director of the centerpiece concert to be [live-streamed from Istanbul](#) tonight (2 p.m. ET in the U.S.). That means Beasley put together the lineups from a star-studded international cast, with a set list meant to charm the world.

His cast is headed by international superstars Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Eddie Palmieri, Robert Glasper, Ramsey Lewis, Esperanza Spalding, Joss Stone, Anat Cohen, Branford Marsalis, Hugh Masekela, Keiko Matsui, Lee Ritenour, Joe Louis Walker, Ruben Blades and Jean-Luc Ponty. They'll perform with Turkish musicians Husnu Senlendirici, Imer Demirer, Bilal Karaman and many others. They'll appear throughout 12 distinct musical segments at Hagia Irene, an ancient domed building — the first Christian church built in Constantinople.

Having served as music director for artists ranging from Queen Latifah to Freddie Hubbard — and worked as MD for the first International Jazz Day concert in 2012 — Beasley seems well-prepared for the job. His Louisiana upbringing and prodigious talents have resulted in jazz chops that earned him a Grammy nomination for his 2009 album *Positootly!* His commercial instincts have landed him work as a soundtrack writer for movies and TV reality shows. An extra dollop of credibility comes from Miles Davis, who hired Beasley for his last touring band.

Beasley spoke to *A Blog Supreme* on the phone from Chicago, where he was about to fly to Istanbul, having gigged with Stanley Clarke the night before.

Howard Mandel for *A Blog Supreme*: John, you're about to fly to Istanbul to direct a live global broadcast of a concert with an international cast of jazz all-stars performing in a dozen different combinations. Are you excited, nervous, full of anticipation?

John Beasley: Not yet. I was music director for the first International Jazz Day concert last year, broadcast from Paris, you know, and the planning for Istanbul started six months ago, so I'm feeling confident. There are always last-minute changes, but you've just got to be liquid and roll with it. The nice thing about this project with all these incredible musicians is that everyone checks their egos at the door. Luckily, I have relationships with most of these musicians already, and have played with a lot of them. So all I have to do is say, "Here's the tempo — go!" and they do.

One challenge is that because it's telecast and webcast, all the segments are six minutes long. To limit people like Wayne Shorter and John McLaughlin, for instance, to playing 32-bar solos without acting as the jazz police — which is the last thing I want to do — *that's* the challenge.

ABS: What were first steps of planning that you took six months ago?

JB: First was looking back at last year's event and thinking about how we could incorporate more geographically appropriate material and people. We wanted to extend our reach towards the Middle East, because this concert originates in Turkey, after all. To emphasize that flavor, we started looking for Turkish musicians, and I began looking for the right repertoire. We decided to do Billy Strayhorn's "Isfahan," written for Duke Ellington's *Far East Suite* and named for a city in Iran. We'll do Dizzy Gillespie's "Night in Tunisia," using [Turkish-American record producer] Arif Mardin's arrangement that Chaka Khan recorded, which is iconic, as a finale. We took the liberty of changing the words — now it's "Night in Istanbul."

I also had to think about personnel issues, like how to incorporate vocalists Dianne Reeves and Al Jarreau — who's singing "Take Five" in homage to Dave Brubeck — into ensembles with Turkish musicians. When you have vocalists, you've got to do the material in ways that work for them.

As more and more talent was enlisted, it became a question of who would play with who. We have almost 40 guest artists and only 12 segments. I thought about how I could put each musician in a musical situation they wouldn't be totally comfortable with, so they'd have to stretch themselves a little bit while keeping their own vibe — which is what jazz musicians do. Then there was the task of figuring out how the material will work in a concert so that it has a good flow.

ABS: Does the venue require special attention to acoustic issues, and is sound production part of your responsibilities?

JB: The concert's being produced in Hagia Irene, a fourth-century stone church in the garden of Topkapi Palace, so, yes, it will be reverberant, like playing in Notre Dame. That will be a challenge in particular for our drummers. They can't be too bashy! And, yes, I'm in direct contact with the sound crew, headed up by Herbie's man. The backline is atrocious: We have a bunch of guitarists who need their own amps, and two trap kits plus percussion. Because the place has been a museum for the last couple hundred years, we have to go through a ministry even to hang up curtains to dampen the sound.

I have to keep track of the rehearsal schedule, which is kind of a nightmare because everyone's arriving at different times. And the video crew — they have to know vibe-wise what's happening with the songs. The lighting guys need the same information. That falls to me, too.

ABS: Do you have any ambivalence about doing this in Turkey, a country which has been accused of human-rights abuses?

JB: Not really. Our own American history is full of problems, like our treatment of Native Americans. No, I see producing the concert in Turkey as a way to be inclusive, to get all these people together, to show the world and the Turkish people how through dialogue things really can be solved. Putting a huge show like this together with people from all over the world around jazz, which is the original world music, a medium for the fusion — for lack of a better word — of cultures. That's how we got here. And this fusion of cultures is still going on.

It takes courage beyond borders to play this music. In the 1930s, jazz guys came to Europe not knowing who they'd play with, but look what came out of that. Making these connections, opening communications, is why we're doing a Jazz Day concert. The mandate is to do it every year in a different center of international commerce, which Istanbul certainly is.

ABS: Have you been to Istanbul before?

JB: No. My plane leaves in an hour.

ABS: Are you going to have any personal time there, to see the city?

JB: Well, I parachute into complete immersion in the gig. But there's a big national holiday on May 1, which I have off. For the next couple of days, I'll do workshops around town at conservatories and universities, and then I have a couple days off again, which I'll use to rest up and walk around. I'm reading a really great book, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, which is like his travelogue written as autobiography, so I'll chase down some of his haunts.

ABS: You're quite well-known and in demand on the West Coast, but not so much elsewhere in the U.S., like New York. Do you think this concert will add to your own visibility?

JB: Well, I'm going to play "Isfahan" with Terence Blanchard on trumpet, Russian tenor saxophonist Igor Butman, Australian alto sax player Dale Barlow, Russian trombonist Alevtina Polyakova, Terri Lyne Carrington on drums and bassist Ben Williams, so I'm pretty excited about that. But I'm just as excited about Milton Nascimento coming from Brazil to sing "Bridges," from *Courage*, his first album to be released in the States, in 1968. It's an important, positive message song, about building bridges.

ABS: Have you thought about staging a campaign on the East Coast to take advantage of the bump to your profile?

JB: I go to New York to record, and I've gigged there, but not lately. I was at the Jazz Standard last summer, had drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts and alto saxophonist Antonio Hart in the band, and we sold out both shows. I hope they'll ask me back. I need people like you to write about me, to get my name in the magazines and on the jazz blogs.

Recently, in L.A., I put a [Thelonious] Monk big band together. MONK'estra, I call it. I started writing these big-band charts and realized quickly I could twist Monk's songs up, keep the spirit and add something unique of my own. As most great songs are, they're really pliable. We've had 10 or 12 gigs. So that's my new project, with the cream of L.A. jazz players, and I'd love to take it on tour. But, economically speaking, it would probably be best if I just traveled with the rhythm section, maybe a lead trumpeter and trombonist, hire other musicians locally, rehearse for a couple days, *then* hit.

ABS: Back to International Jazz Day: Is Herbie Hancock your boss?

JB: I'm particularly close with Herbie, and he's the figurehead for sure, for all of us. International Jazz Day is his vision, and as I see it we're helping him to execute his vision. He's totally busy, so I'm not talking to him every day, but when I need to talk to him, he's there, engaged, and he wants to know what's going on. He's a great boss, because he lets us do what we're hired to do. He's not in anybody's face.

It's all really about International Jazz Day. If I were a club owner, a jazz educator, a musical-instrument store, a record store — anywhere in the world — I'd totally capitalize on this. It's like Earth Day is for environmentalism, a great opportunity for our music to get a lot of great publicity.

I'm totally looking forward to the concert. I don't get nervous. You can't get nervous with these guys. It's like I told you, I'll just say, "Go!"