

DownBeat Magazine

All-Star Lineup Shines at International Jazz Day Concert

The third annual International Jazz Day concert, held this year in the host city of Osaka, Japan, on April 30, offered a plethora of brilliant performances.

Spearheaded by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Jazz Day is a celebration in which cities around the globe host jazz concerts and educational events. This year, 196 countries participated with Somalia being a late entry. Reportedly, even the United States' McMurdo Station in Antarctica joined in the festivities.

Pianist John Beasley served as musical director for the grand concert in Osaka. The lineup boasted the same customary star power of internationally acclaimed musicians as the two years prior. But this year, the musicians veered away from the heavy emphasis on conventional jazz repertoire.

Held at historic Osaka Castle Park, the two-hour performance took on an auspicious tone from the beginning with Steve Turre playing the conch shells and Shuichi Hidano pounding a massive Taiko drum alongside two other traditional Japanese percussionists. The cross-cultural invocation alluded to a Santería religious ceremony in which musicians begin by playing a "Changó" to create pathways for sacred West African deities. Soon after T.S. Monk kept the percussive spirited going by delivering a hard-hitting solo improvisation on the trap drums.

That mesmerizing one-two punch of an opener dovetailed into a vivacious reading of Horace Silver's "Saint Vitus Dance" with Dee Dee Bridgewater singing the intricate melody with the fluidity of a seasoned hard-bop saxophonist. Trumpeter Roy Hargrove and bassist Esperanza Spalding followed Bridgewater's incredible scatting with equally supple solos.

The musicians sprinkled in standards judiciously. It was midway through the concert until the audience was treated to another well-known classic. Singer Roberta Gambarini led a sextet through an elegant reading of "Round Midnight," which was followed by an fine rendition of Miles Davis 1963 chestnut "Seven Steps To Heaven," with Turre on trombone,



sharing the frontline and trading solos with tenor saxophonist Lew Tabackin and trumpeter Terumasa Hino.

What raised the stakes for the International Jazz Day was the performances by Monk Institute affiliate newcomers such as Lalah Hathaway and Gregory Porter. Both electrified by singing their own material instead of doling out listless covers. Riding the success of her recent Grammy win for her jazz-funk orchestral retooling of “Something” with the Brooklyn-based combo Snarky Puppy, Hathaway reprised the new arrangement of her hit with a large ensemble. As keyboardist Kris Bowers laid down hypnotic chords, Hathaway’s soothing alto coaxed the gorgeous melody as the sexy ballad slowly crested into a mid-tempo funk workout with a mighty horn section responding to Spalding’s undulating electric bass motif and Terri Lyne Carrington’s propulsive drumming.

The soul-jazz vibe continued as Porter combined gospel and soul sounds with a gritty romp through “Liquid Spirit,” the title track to his 2013 Blue Note album. Complementing his authoritative baritone with juke-joint party claps, the song gained a deeper sense of the blues than its recorded version, thanks to John Scofield’s gutbucket guitar solo. After Porter invigorated the crowd, he intertwined lyrics from the famous Negro spiritual, “Wade In The Water.”

Later in the program, the soul-jazz quota gave way to jazz-funk with a fierce take on Herbie Hancock’s mid-1970s joint, “Hang Up Your Hang-Ups.” The forceful reading featured Scofield handling the signature funky guitar riff famously recorded by Melvin “Wah Wah Watson” Ragin.” The pianist—who is UNESCO’s Goodwill Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue—had already spellbound the audience with soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter during a phenomenal version of Michiel Borstlap’s “Memory Of Enchantment.”

Other highlight was a propulsive interpretation of Wayne Wallace’s Latin jazz number, “Esta Noche,” showcasing the dynamic father-daughter team of Pete Escovedo on congas and timbales and Sheila E. on trap drums along with Courtney Pine blowing a spiraling Coltraneque solo.

Legendary pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi offered a suspenseful excursion through “Autumn Sea,” on which she featured Tabackin, her husband and former music partner, who played flute.

Scofield and blues guitarists Chris Thomas King and Joe Louis Walker delivered a razor-sharp rendition of Robert Johnson’s “Ramblin’ On My Mind,” and Malian singer Oumou Sangaré gave an exhilarating performance of “Yala.”

The concert’s only misstep was the reading of “Bye, Bye Blackbird,” featuring Dionne Warwick’s pedantic scattling.

Although an all-hands-on-deck, closing performance of John Lennon’s “Imagine” had the potential to be schmaltzy, it was another highlight thanks largely to Hathaway’s impassioned vocal delivery at the beginning, combined with Hancock’s plaintive piano chords and Sheila E.’s atmospheric

percussion. The tune unfolded with a joyous South African rhythmic undercurrent as various singers swapped leads and Shorter unfurled a wondrous soprano saxophone midway through the song. As spirits soared high from both the musicians and concertgoers, this finale emitted not a hint of treacle but rather plenty of purposeful heart.

—*John Murph*

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