

International Jazz Day

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April 30, 2014 Osaka, Japan



Photo courtesy of Steven Mundinger

It was a great honor to have Osaka, Japan as the site for International Jazz Day 2014. Japan has always been a jazz loving culture, but hosting the day was something special, and especially international. The line-up of musicians and speakers was a rare chance to hear excellent music and revelatory ideas about one of the world's most internationalized forms of music.

Supported by the United Nations International, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz, the concept for Jazz Day for the past three years is to bring together people from all around the world to celebrate, perform and learn about jazz and its potential for uniting people peacefully. Around the world, 196 countries held events to celebrate the day.

The day's workshops, discussions and performances were a striking testament to the vitality, relevance and indeed the reality of jazz. All three hours of the day's concert, broadcast live around the globe, is available for viewing online (link below). The concert showcased too many superb musicians to list, but all the performers are listed on the homepage for International Jazz Day (link below). They came not just as performers, but also as emissaries from the world of jazz to the larger world.



Feeling as I always do at festivals, frustrated at being unable to divide myself in two, or three, to hear everything, I headed to the day's educational sessions to pick up a fresh set of insights about jazz from musicians, journalists and scholars. Kicking off the day with speeches from the assembled diplomats, the stage was set for thinking

about jazz as an international music that holds soft power to facilitate interaction between cultures.

Herbie Hancock, this year's UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador and International Jazz Day Co-Chair, was the flame to ignite the room. Just the way Herbie said, "international jazz day," got me. Barely into the press conference, he'd already injected rhythm, accent and a heavy shot of cool into the proceedings. The panel of assembled musicians for the morning's opener was like one of those imagined greatest bands ever.



Hancock went on to say that jazz really has the power to break down barriers, and has always been about "peace, unity and harmony." Hancock noted that jazz is a form of cultural diplomacy with the power to help create a world with less anger, pain, war and suffering, a world we would be proud to leave to the next generation. He noted that, "innovative thinking can advance miracles." By miracles, he meant equality, tolerance and peace. By innovative thinking, he meant thinking in jazz.

Dee Dee Bridgewater explained that jazz is very much about social issues, race relations and struggles, as well as the deep connections between cultures, America and Africa, but other times and places, too. Claudio Roditi said jazz is not just one style of music, but an expression of culture that uses melody, feeling, percussion and balances rules and freedom. Lew Tabackin noted the importance of non-technical realities and that accidents can be wonderful. He noted the importance of trial and error in finding one's own voice and developing the visual thinking and tonal virtuosity that cannot be achieved by just practicing the notes or chords.



Photo courtesy of Steven Mundinger

At the first session of the educational program, UNESCO Artist for Peace Marcus Miller and Hancock discussed the importance of knowing the history of jazz. Because of the history of slavery, jazz is really about freedom, Miller and Hancock emphasized. And freedom, they noted, scares some people and most governments. Miller spoke about his musical project about slavery, a series of works influenced by a visit to Africa. He said he realized that jazz was, "not just about anger, hurt and pain, but was a testament to human beings being able to transcend." Hancock said, "You can feel that humanity because musicians turned slavery into beauty, poison into medicine." In that sense, he said, jazz is an ongoing source of inspiration and encouragement to make a transformation in ourselves.

In the following session, Wayne Shorter went deep, and far out, to explain the spiritual, philosophical and abstract

ideas that influenced his understanding of jazz. He said he was an avid reader as a child, and still is, reading comic books, fairy tales, novels, science fiction, and fantasy and watching movies of all kinds. He said those influences were important because they “seemed more real than the reality commercial society tries to sell us.” He liked the way stories could include flying, escaping and dreaming, ideas that helped him play jazz. “The challenge is,” he said in his elliptical, contemplative way, “was to play what you wish for.” He drew surprised reactions from the crowd when he said he did not practice anymore, because, he asked, “How do you rehearse the unknown? How do you practice what you can’t predict?”

He said when he was young, Art Blakey told him, “You can’t hide behind your instrument.” Jazz, he said, is about taking off masks, getting out there naked, and understanding there is no such thing as a mistake or an accident. In the end, he said, “Jazz means I dare you to create.” Shorter’s ideas ranged from concept to concept, from the stage to outer space, from the essentials of life to the challenge of living a life creatively without being limited. It was no easy task to follow his ideas, but it was a welcome chance to hear his deep, wild ideas, and to avoid the standard interview rubric of questions like, “What was it like playing in Weather Report?” Shorter should assemble his grand, eloquent ideas into a book! Or two, or three!

After the cosmic trajectories of Shorter’s talk, I landed back on earth to hear jazz journalist Charlie Gans talk with Dee Dee Bridgewater on three of the most amazing vocalists in jazz—Billie Holiday, Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln. Bridgewater was particularly suited to talk about Billie Holiday after playing her in a stage play about her life that included singing her songs. After a run in New York, she performed the play entirely in French in Paris. Bridgewater brought out the human side of Billie Holiday’s life, pointing out how she loved to cook, had a great, dry sense of humor and could curse like a sailor.

Investigating Holiday’s life for the play, Bridgewater said she felt “possessed,” and gradually began to speak, sing, and feel like Billie, having trouble after the play finished to re-establish her own voice. With Gans supplying fascinating background and proving questions, Bridgewater concluded, “She represented the fight for freedom. She made all her choices and did not let others shape or mold her. She showed us that we need to be ready to fight and should not allow ourselves to be dictated to.”

Gans and Bridgewater also spoke about Nina Simone, one of the first vocalists to fully embrace her blackness and her African-ness. Following the discussion on Simone, and a stunning video of her work, there was, sadly, hardly time left for Abbey Lincoln. There was just too much to say about all three singers, and since time was tight for the day’s schedule, Gans’ and Bridgewater’s insights on their lives and work, like Holiday’s own life, was tragically cut short.

Photo courtesy of Steven Munding

The rest of the day was filled with other lectures, in both English and Japanese, with interpretation going both ways, and workshops, performances, film screenings and panel discussions. Every session was standing room only. It was impossible to take it all in, but in some ways the day was also about just hanging out with other jazz lovers. The reactions, comments and conversations flowing in the halls between the events was intriguing and impassioned.

Everyone, though, was waiting for the evening’s concert, which took place in the park surrounding Osaka Castle. The contrast between the traditional defensive structure of the castle, its white exterior lit up brightly, and the open, fluid structures of jazz, flowing out into the evening’s air, could not have been sharper. Both were beautiful, but in ways that seemed to ask of listeners to make a choice in how to live--safe within the secure and known, or open to the unknown of creating in the moment. Humanity can build more fortresses or it can produce more culture. By day’s end, the choice couldn’t have been clearer.



(May 20, 2014)

The full concert: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dml0bs93ac>

Related videos: <https://www.youtube.com/intljazzday>

Jazz Day official site: <http://jazzday.com>

Great talk by Herbie Hancock and Marcus Miller: <http://jazzday.com/videos/>
