

'Jazz mecca' Osaka to host star-studded global concert

What comes to mind when you think of Osaka? Maybe *takoyaki* (octopus dumplings), the Hanshin Tigers, Universal Studios Japan, wacky comedy and down-to-earth, unpretentious people.

Osaka wants to add jazz to that list. The city has scored a coup by being chosen by UNESCO to host the third International Jazz Day (IJD), which is being celebrated worldwide on April 30.

"To have been chosen, among the many incredible cities that came forth as potential hosts for this day, has great significance for us," says Kunio Kano, executive director of the Osaka Government Tourism Bureau. "It is a fantastic opportunity in our efforts to reposition Osaka on the cultural map."

Daytime events during this year's IJD comprise master classes, roundtable discussions, improvisational workshops and education programs led by world-renowned jazz musicians, educators and diplomats.

Discussion topics include "Philosophy of Life Through Jazz" with saxman Wayne Shorter, "Jazz and Human Rights" with journalist Charlie Gans and vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, and "Women in Jazz" with pianist and composer Toshiko Akiyoshi and vocalist Esperanza Spalding.

An outdoor evening concert at Osaka Castle Park will feature performances by Shorter, Bridgewater, Akiyoshi and Spalding, as well as UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock, Sheila E., Pete Escovedo, Lalah Hathaway, Terumasa Hino, Earl Klugh, Marcus Miller, T. S. Monk, John Scofield and Lew Tabackin.

The concert will be streamed live via the UNESCO, U.S. Department of State, and Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz websites.

"I'm very excited that the main event of IJD will be in Osaka," says Hancock via e-mail. "There is a long history, an association of jazz and Osaka. I didn't know about it until recently."

UNESCO's website notes that Osaka was known as Japan's "jazz mecca" in the early to mid-1920s.

"Osaka is an ideal choice to serve as the International Jazz Day Global Host City," UNESCO says. "Osaka's major early figures in jazz include composer Ryoichi Hattori and trumpeter Fumio Nanri, nicknamed the 'Satchmo of Japan' by Louis Armstrong."

Hancock says Japan is like his second home.

"I've been to Japan more than any country to perform," he says. "The support for jazz is incredible in Japan. And the Kansai area is especially close to me. It's such a dynamic area, real fighters — to be at the top, they have a fight-to-win spirit."

American keyboardist, composer and arranger John Beasley is the musical director of this year's IJD. He seconds Hancock's high opinion of Japanese jazz fans.

"Japan is one of my favorite places to play in the world," Beasley says. "Audiences are very enthusiastic, and they're deep listeners."

Tom Carter, president of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz (which is presenting IJD in partnership with UNESCO), stresses the event's global reach.

“Each of the past two International Jazz Day celebrations reached more than 1 billion people through jazz performances, education and outreach programs, and media coverage in all 195 UNESCO member states,” says Carter in a statement. “This is a phenomenal figure, and we believe even more people will participate in 2014.”

Hancock says jazz can help bridge the gaps that divide people.

“Jazz always has been bringing cultures, religions, countries, ethnicities together,” he says. “My main focus is bringing ideas that bring out truth and misconceptions about differences . . . as part of a process of creating dialogue that leads to peace.”

One recent example, Hancock says, is UNESCO’s role in sponsoring jazz events for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

“They were being ignored by the rest of the world,” he says. “They were so happy that we reached out to them . . . and that they were not forgotten.

“IJD is being celebrated in every country around the world, including some countries with internal conflicts, you know places where maybe you wouldn’t expect to have jazz,” Hancock says. “Like North Korea, places in the Middle East and in Antarctica.”

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova says jazz embodies the spirit of the U.N. cultural body. “It brings people together and builds peace, tolerance and understanding,” she says in a statement. “It has been the soundtrack for positive social change, from the fight against racism to the struggle for democracy.”

Given the organizers’ laudable aim of furthering the cause of world peace and harmony through the universal medium of jazz, you have to wonder why the website (www.ijd2014-osaka.jp) where reservations for the daytime lectures and workshops can be made and tickets to the IJD evening concert can be purchased is in Japanese only. An unfortunate oversight, no doubt.

The International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert takes place at Osaka Castle Nishinomaru Garden’s Special Stage on April 30 (7 p.m. start; ¥8,000-¥16,000). For more information on the global concert and other Jazz Day events, visit www.ijd2014-osaka.jp (in Japanese) or www.jazzday.com.

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