

## Downbeat Diplomacy for Black Musicians at International Jazz Day

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Dee Dee Bridgewater, Roy Hargrove, Esperanza Spalding and Troy Roberts perform on stage at the 2014 International Jazz Day concert on April 30, 2014, in Osaka, Japan.

Keith Tsuji/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

During the grand finale of the third annual [International Jazz Day](#) concert—held last week in Osaka, Japan—more than 35 jazz musicians stretched across an elaborate stage in Osaka Castle Park and performed John Lennon’s 1971 anthem, “Imagine.” Most of them hailed from the U.S., but the lineup also included the South African guitarist and singer Jonathan Butler, the Malian songstress Oumou Sangaré, and Japanese virtuosos: pianists Toshiko Akiyoshi and Makoto Ozone and trumpeters Terumasa Hino and Takuya Kuroda.

With their bracing harmonies and deft musicianship underneath pianist Herbie Hancock’s joyous South African-flavored arrangement, the ensemble looked like a miniature United Nations—and that comparison came as no surprise, considering that [UNESCO](#) and the [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz](#) produced the two-hour concert.

Although Osaka was host city for this year, cities in 195 other countries joined in a worldwide celebration of International Jazz Day on April 30 by staging jazz concerts and educational seminars.

Serious jazz fans weren’t particularly surprised by the star power on hand—which included singers Gregory Porter and Dee Dee Bridgewater, bassist Esperanza Spalding, saxophonist Wayne Shorter and percussionist Sheila E.—because jazz has long been a global phenomenon. What made this even more auspicious was its lofty mission: to use jazz as a force for global peace, unity and dialogue.

According to Patrick Linehan, a U.S. consul general stationed in Osaka who helped facilitate negotiations between the International Jazz Day founders and Japan, the city of Osaka was an ideal choice because it already boasts a rich jazz tradition that dates to 1945 during the Allied occupation of Japan at the end of World War II. Many black American soldiers—some being jazz musicians themselves—helped plant the seeds of jazz there. It has since blossomed, with Osaka being a major jazz hub on the international cultural scene.

“You will not find more intense jazz aficionados anywhere else in the world than in Japan,” Linehan says. “When the opportunity came to raising its profile on the global stage by hosting something like this, the Monk Institute and UNESCO were basically pushing on an open door.”

Placed in a greater historical context, International Jazz Day builds upon the legacy the U.S. State Department set forth in 1956, when it began dispatching jazz stars such as Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington and Dave Brubeck during the height of the Cold War. The underlying goal was to counter the Soviet Union’s propaganda of the U.S. being culturally inferior to Europe. It was actually Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., from Harlem, who first proposed the idea of Dizzy touring southern Europe, South Asia and the Middle East in March 1956 as a goodwill ambassador. Soon after, the State Department launched annual [Jazz Ambassador tours](#) on which the country’s finest jazz musicians provided the ideal cultural export to ease tensions and create stronger international bonds.

The tours weren’t without hitches. A year after Louis Armstrong toured Ghana in 1956 on behalf of the State Department, he bowed out after President Dwight Eisenhower declined to send federal armed forces to Little Rock, Ark., to enforce school-integration laws. The often congenial Armstrong in protest said, “The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell.” Armstrong’s indignation helped ignite Eisenhower to take action on the Little Rock matter, especially considering how hypocritical America looked abroad regarding its own race-relations while it was sending jazz musicians to forge cultural diplomacy.

Despite that episode, the tours continued until 1978. Now, more than three decades later, with other American-born genres such as rock and hip-hop surpassing jazz’s commercial appeal in the music industry, jazz remains a potent U.S. cultural export. Bridgewater believes it’s because of its underlying themes of freedom.

“Jazz,” she says, “has always been a music that allows musicians to express a number of social issues. It has always been a music that addresses the problems within the United States in particular with regards to race relations and the struggles of African Americans.” She went on to add: “It’s also a music that has addressed the indignities that people [throughout] all of the world—not just us—had to bear. That’s part of the reason why this music has become so popular.”