

Global Flavors and Asides to Obamas at White House Jazz Gala



Herbie Hancock and Aretha Franklin performing on Friday at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert at the White House. Credit...Zach Gibson/The New York Times

By Nate Chinen

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WASHINGTON — A few songs into the fifth International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, on the South Lawn of the White House on Friday night, a pointedly multicultural coalition took the stage. [Chucho Valdés on piano](#) and Paquito D’Rivera on clarinet formed an eminent Cuban

contingent. India had an ambassador in the tabla master Zakir Hussain. West Africa was represented by the Beninese guitarist Lionel Loueke, while Australia's envoy was the trumpeter James Morrison. On bass was Ben Williams, from the Michigan Park neighborhood here.

They played "Con Poco Coco," a descarga recorded in the early 1950s by Mr. Valdés's father, Bebo. Beyond that, this virtuoso assembly embodied a central ideal behind the concert, an edited version of which was broadcast on ABC on Saturday night and will be streaming on jazzday.com for the rest of this month. As the centerpiece of International Jazz Day — presented by [Unesco](http://unesco.org), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — the event was a show of musical kinship across every kind of border.

At the same time, it was a gala jazz concert at the White House, only the third of its kind: For precedent, you would have to look back to the administrations of Jimmy Carter (in 1978) and Bill Clinton (in 1993). And it had all due pageantry and production value, befitting the official stature of a music that President Obama characterized, in his welcoming remarks, as "driven by an unmistakably American spirit."

He added: "It is, in so many ways, the story of our nation's progress: Born out of the struggle of African-Americans yearning for freedom. Forged in a crucible of cultures — a product of the diversity that would forever define our nation's greatness." He put no particular emphasis on the word "diversity," but it rang through the program, which featured not only a preponderance of jazz artists but also Aretha Franklin, Buddy Guy and Sting.

Herbie Hancock — the [pianist, Unesco good-will ambassador and chairman](#) of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, the lead organization behind the event — cropped up a handful of times in the show, typically as an accompanist or a catalyst. (The musical director was John Beasley; the producer was Michelle Day.) Mr. Hancock was part of the blue-chip accompaniment for Sting, who brought sinewy composure to his jazz-influenced song "Sister Moon." Later Mr. Hancock led an impromptu-feeling memorial tribute to Prince, a medley that briefly featured the rapper Rapsody and culminated, stirringly, in Ms. Franklin's leading a singalong of "Purple Rain."

The presumed taste of a network television audience could have played some role in the heavy quotient of vocalists. Ms. Franklin opened the concert in magisterial yet low-key form, giving Leon Russell's "A Song for You" the flickering rubato and somber purpose of an offertory. (By "you" she seemed to mean President Obama and the first lady, Michelle Obama; "I will be sad to see you go," she declared before starting into the song.)

The jazz singers mostly tackled standards from their working repertory, delivering quick distillations of their personae: regal and exhortative for Dianne Reeves; cool yet come-hither for Diana Krall; jittery but suave for Jamie Cullum; and wily and pliable for Al Jarreau. Kurt Elling and Dee Dee Bridgewater, who share a crackling brand of showmanship, traded verses on the bedrock blues "St. James Infirmary," in a version that began with a fanfare by the United States Army Herald Trumpets and included a smartly blaring solo by Trombone Shorty.

Despite the crush of singers, it was possible for an instrumentalist to make a potent impression. The trumpeter Terence Blanchard was slashingly fierce on "Straight Up and Down," a vintage postbop cherner by the pianist Chick Corea, who led a rhythm team with Christian McBride on bass and Brian Blade on drums. The guitarist Pat Metheny sounded at once relaxed and expeditionary on his fluttering anthem "Minuano," delivered with an assist from Ms. Reeves.



President Obama delivered welcoming remarks at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert. Credit...Zach Gibson/The New York Times

Another guitarist, John McLaughlin, delivered a ripping solo on “Spanish Key,” from Miles Davis’s “Bitches Brew,” which felt stifled by time constraints but had all the right firepower: Mr. Hussain on tabla, Mr. Blanchard on trumpet, Mr. Corea on synthesizer, Marcus Miller on bass and Wayne Shorter on soprano saxophone.

Mr. Shorter also took part in a chamber deconstruction of his impressionistic standard “Footprints,” with [Esperanza Spalding on bass](#) and Joey Alexander on piano. It flowed like water along a creek bed, burbling with inquisitive interplay — a transporting experience in just four minutes, and the most purely musical exchange of the concert. ([Mr. Alexander is 12](#), which is usually the first thing to know about him. He made that fact a distant afterthought.)

A few moments seemed conceived with the president and first lady in mind. Mr. Guy, one of a handful of artists who had already [made at least one indelible appearance at the White House](#), hungrily tore apart “Meet Me in Chicago,” as if to hint not only at the Obama family’s past but also its possible future. And Hugh Masekela, the South African flugelhorn player, performed “Bring Him Back Home (Nelson Mandela),” a defiant, exuberant cry of protest for one of the president’s acknowledged heroes. The power of that gesture, in this setting, hasn’t ebbed.

But Mr. Masekela also underscored the concert’s conviction — articulated at one point by Irina Bokova, Unesco’s director-general — that jazz is now a global art. It’s a departure from the rhetoric that typically surrounds any mingling of jazz and state, a parable of democracy and American exceptionalism. Despite its nods to the past and concessions to popular taste, this was a concert less

concerned with the conditions that made jazz possible and more interested in what jazz's influence and example might yet make possible today.

Highlights From International Jazz Day

The first International Jazz Day concert took place four years ago [at the United Nations](#) in New York. This year, after stops in Istanbul, Paris and Osaka, it came here to the nation's capital. But while the all-star concert [on the White House lawn](#) was a shining centerpiece, it was one of hundreds of Jazz Day events around the world.

Washington, a city with a deep jazz culture that still endures amid recent hardships, was the epicenter all day Saturday: a citywide swarm of performances, panels, workshops and film screenings, in spaces grand and unassuming. Below are some highlights.

Duke Ellington School of the Arts Jazz Band, DuPont Circle In an outdoor opening ceremony, the best moment belonged to this local [high school](#) band. When Herbie Hancock sat in on "Watermelon Man," he shared the keyboard bench with a student, Sequoia Snyder, who watched his hands intently before playing her own, startlingly poised solo.

Dianne Reeves, Thrive DC For her appearance at [Thrive DC](#), a homeless services organization for women, Ms. Reeves was magnificent and on point. "I sing no victim's song," she boomed in "Endangered Species," continuing: "I am a woman. I am an artist. And I know where my voice belongs." She then prefaced a luxurious version of "Misty" with a childhood memory of jazzing up a Bach aria in her choir.

Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards, Kennedy Center [Ms. Sumbry-Edwards](#) is a tap dancer with a gift both kinetic and musical, and on a version of "In a Sentimental Mood," featuring the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance Ensemble, she engaged in agile repartee with the pianist [Carmen Staaf](#), both parties listening and responding deeply.

Donvonte McCoy, 18th Street Lounge I spent the final moments of International Jazz Day at a gig with no formal connection to the event. But Mr. McCoy, an assured young trumpeter, brought taut purpose to his playing, surmounting a shaky rhythm section. Some in the crowd were dancing, others were listening or talking, but the spirit was strong and right.

Correction: May 1, 2016

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated the day of the performance. It was Friday, not Saturday.