

Will Smith, Quincy Jones & Herbie Hancock Celebrate International Jazz Day in Havana

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Esperanza Spalding, third from left, and Chucho Valdes, third from right, share a moment at the International Jazz Day concert in Havana on April 30, 2017.

From the opening number of the sixth International Jazz Day concert on Sunday in Havana, Cuba, the unifying global spirit of the event rang through. "Manteca," the celebrated 1947 collaboration between American trumpeter [Dizzy Gillespie](#) and Cuban percussionist Chano Pozo that ushered in a new era of Afro-Cuban-infused

jazz, featured an ensemble that included German, French and Cuban trumpet players and a Russian sax player.

Presented by UNESCO and the Washington, D.C.-based Thelonious Monk Institute, International Jazz Day brings jazz artists from around the globe together annually on April 30 to celebrate the power of jazz as a creative and cultural force. Previous host cities have included Osaka, Paris, Istanbul and D.C.

A certain utopian ideal surrounding the event led participating musicians and organizers to make such pronouncements as “jazz has the power to move mankind forward in a world” and even espouse its harmonious ability to resolve global conflict that felt refreshing, if sometimes hyperbolic, in a world that grows increasingly fractured.

“We’re trying to show through the music we can come together any time, at any moment, despite all the political [discourse] of who’s on the left and who’s on the right, and do something together,” Cameroonian bassist Richard Bona told *Billboard*. “I think that’s the strongest message out of all this: music is humanity and that’s what we’re trying to bring first.”

Holding International Jazz Day in Cuba was made easier after President Barack Obama eased restrictions with Cuba during his tenure, including the re-establishment of diplomatic ties in 2014. “Now that the barriers are being taken away, I’m looking forward to seeing more of an open relationship between the United States and Cuba,” said [Herbie Hancock](#), UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for International Dialogue. “I think this is going to be a great signal for the rest of the world to open up and come together so we can all interact and express ourselves and show what’s in our hearts.”

The collaborative nature of jazz serves as a metaphor for global unity and respect, Hancock said. “That’s what we’re all here for -- to help each other, and the music of jazz expresses that. Musicians on the stage aren’t judging each other. We’re always interested in whatever happens onstage and turning it into something that’s useful, something that’s good.”

For Cuban jazz greats Chucho Valdez and [Gonzalo Rubalcaba](#), both of whom now live in Florida, having International Jazz Day in their native country is the realization of what once seemed impossible.

“I belong to the generation of jazz players from the '60s. There was much confusion in those days,” Valdez said. “No one understood what jazz was about.” That began to change through the three-day Havana Jam in 1979, which featured American and Cuban acts sharing the same stage. “What you’re seeing today is a fulfillment of a dream that my generation had back then.”

Rubalcaba stressed that these watershed moments in Cuban and American jazz history cannot only happen every 40 years. “I don’t want this to be isolated,” he said. “We have to keep the interest of the people going.”

Though the performance came off nearly glitch-free, putting on a world-class concert in Cuba provided challenges, especially in a country where Internet access is extremely limited, even in the otherwise-modern Havana. Several crates of equipment, including generators and lighting, were shipped from the United States, and music director and jazz pianist John Beasley handled the complications with humor. “Usually I send MP3s and charts [via the Internet to the musicians], but that’s been hard to do here,” he said the day before the concert. “In the last day, we added another song, and it’s all been by flash drive. I had to go to [Esperanza \[Spalding\]](#)’s room, get the song from her, then take it to the UNESCO office to get it printed, take the flash drive back. It’s all old-school. In the days before the Internet, cats just brought the music, you rehearsed and you played. Why not?”

Monk Institute president Tom Carter stressed that the Cuban government issued no restrictions on which artists to invite, including musicians that had defected. “We were encouraged to bring anyone here,” he said.

Co-hosted by Hancock, Will Smith, [Quincy Jones](#) -- who told *Billboard* this was his first time in Cuba since 1952, when he was an 18-year-old upstart in Lionel Hampton’s band and dating Cuban singer [La Lupe](#) -- and 2011 best new artist Grammy winner Spalding, the two-hour concert featured more than 50 artists, including America’s [Cassandra Wilson](#), [Regina Carter](#), [Ambrose Akinmusire](#), [Marcus Miller](#) and [Kurt Elling](#); Brazil’s Ivan Lins; China’s A Bu; Korea’s Youn Sun Nah; Lebanon’s Tarek Yamani; and France’s [Marc Antoine](#).

The repertoire at Havana’s historic Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso leaned toward Cuban compositions, though one of the most stirring moments came when Valdez and Rubalcaba performed an incandescent version of [Thelonious Monk](#)’s “Blue Monk” in honor of the 100th anniversary of the jazz titan’s birth.

There is no empirical metric to measure the day’s success. Instead, Carter says the goal is to “expand the audience, whether [people are] listening to jazz radio or downloading or buying full albums. It’s making them aware of different musicians and of this music that we all knew was originally American music, but now, in almost every country of the world, you have jazz musicians.”

The sixth International Jazz Day comes at a time when jazz accounts for only 1.2 percent of total music volume consumed in the U.S., according to Nielsen Music’s 2016 mid-year report. But artists like [Kamasi Washington](#) and [Thundercat](#) -- both of whom participated in the Monk Institute’s “BeBop to Hip-Hop” innovative public school program as youths -- are infusing the genre with a new energy. “I think it’s getting better,” said Jones, whose management company represents 17 jazz artists. In addition to the concert, which was televised live across Cuba, streamed on the UNESCO website and will air on BET in June and on various PBS stations later, 195 countries held performances and other initiatives to mark the day. “In these countries, it’s an opportunity for them to showcase their musicians,” Carter says.

“From an educational standpoint, it’s to encourage musicianship and the understanding of jazz’s importance and value and impact on all genres.”

Across Cuba, a weeklong slate of activities took place, including 125 concerts by Cuban jazz musicians and a music curriculum about the history of jazz that was taught in more than 11,000 Cuban schools.

That sixth International Jazz Day occurred as music programs in U.S. public schools have already been severely curtailed and budget cuts loom for the National Endowment for the Arts and PBS; this was not lost on the participants. Beasley said such an event “shows how far behind [America] is in education. That a country as poor as [Cuba] still believes in art and educating their country [is why] you see these amazing Cuban musicians. These people are kicking people’s asses musically. They practice all day.”

To help make up for the cuts in school education programs, Carter said the Monk Institute is participating in the development of a curriculum called Math, Science and Music. The program uses jazz, as well as other styles, to teach the basics of science and math.

International Jazz Day may not reach the lofty global harmony goals to which its organizers aspire, but the annual celebration of the art form is a public declaration that jazz -- and the human spirit -- cannot be silenced.

“Throughout recent history many tyrants who have captured some areas of the world, like Hitler, banned jazz because he knew that jazz is something that will bolster the spirit of the common people when he wanted to shut that down,” Hancock told *Billboard*. “It’s also happened in the past in the Soviet Union that jazz was suppressed. But jazz is a music that can’t really be suppressed. It finds its way somehow. It’s like water: It finds its way out in spite of any kind of obstacles that stand in its way.”