

# Artists Collaborate & Celebrate at International Jazz Day Festivities in Havana

NEWS, HERBIE HANCOCK, ESPERANZA SPALDING, REGINA CARTER, CHUCHO VALDÉS, MARCUS MILLER

By John Murph | May 9, 2017 12:04 PM



Adel González (left), Orlando “Maraca” Valle, Yandy Martínez, Sixto Llorente and Héctor Quintana perform at the International Jazz Day Global Concert at the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso in Havana, Cuba, on April 30. (Photo: Steve Munding)

After engaging with Marcus Miller’s popping electric bass ostinato, Ambrose Akinmusire’s piquant trumpet harmonies and Antonio Sanchez’s lithe, funk-informed rhythmic thrust on a compelling version of his composition “4 a.m.,” Herbie Hancock approached the

podium in Havana's Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso and recited an African proverb: "A city without music is a dead city." The crowd roared. He continued, "And I think we can all agree that tonight Havana is without a doubt the most vibrant, alive and the most spirited place on the planet."

Hancock's pronouncement—made at the sixth annual International Jazz Day all-star concert on April 30—was a reflection of his roles as a UNESCO Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue and chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Visitors traveling to Cuba as part of the Jazz Day events were frequently immersed in an effervescent music culture that pervades Havana.

"It's important for the world to see the high level of musicianship in Cuba," said pianist Roberto Fonseca, a Havana native who played on the spectacular concert opener "Manteca" and then later on "Bilongo," which also featured Cameroonian bassist Richard Bona. "I feel like I'm making history by being a part of this. I'm not just representing the young generation [of Cuban musicians], I'm representing the people here who never give up."

This year's all-star concert was a splendid platform for showcasing homegrown talent. Percussionist Oscar Valdés, who was in the seminal Afro-Cuban jazz-fusion group Irakere with pianist Chucho Valdés, began the concert with a hypnotic batá performance.

Cuban musicians performed throughout the concert, frequently resulting in some intriguing cross-pollinations, such as "Changüi," on which Tunisian-born oud player and singer Dhafer Youssef's piercing caroling commenced the composition, which eventually showcased fine essays from violinist William Robejo and tres guitarist Francisco "Pancho" Amat.

Vocalist Bobby Carcassés fronted a sextet with bassist and singer Espernaza Spalding on the contagious "I Adore You." Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Chucho Valdés delivered a memorable, two-piano rendition of "Blue Monk." Singer Sixto Llorente and flutist Orlando "Maraca" Valle led a 13-piece ensemble, composed entirely of Cuban musicians, on the soul-stirring tune "New Era."

“Having so many musicians to draw from was a luxury because it allowed us to dream up scenarios of what could happen,” said pianist John Beasley, who co-directed the concert with pianist Emilio Vega. “To me, that’s what it means to play jazz.”

But one didn’t have to attend the grand concert to hear astonishing music. It could be found in places such as Callejón de Hamel, a narrow, two-block long alley where rumba groups perform every Sunday; the Fábrica de Arte Cubano, a warehouse art space loaded with dazzling contemporary visual arts, dancing, live music, food and drinks; or the historic Egrem recording studios, which houses an adjacent performance space for intimate concerts. Music venues such as La Zorra y El Cuervo, Jazz Café and Delirio Habanero, as well as several restaurants, showcased live music.

Numerous jazz stars played at various jams throughout the city, including Miller, Bona, Spalding, pianist Christian Sands, bassist Ben Williams and saxophonists Antonio Hart and Melissa Aldana.

“There’s such a connection in the world of jazz with the Afro-Cuban traditions,” said Miller, who played in invigorating jam sessions led by the pianist Bellita and her band Jazz Tumbatá (at El Tablao) and pianist Ramoncito Valle (at Fábrica de Arte Cubano). “We’ve been hearing about how talented these Cuban musicians are all our lives. So to actually come and witness it for the first time is really incredible.”

As part of the Jazz Day events, the Monk Institute offered programs at schools throughout Cuba. “This year’s educational component was our biggest ever, with more workshops and clinics,” said JB Dyas, the Monk Institute’s vice-president of education and curriculum development. “We had a wide array of topics, from general to specific, in an effort to reach and teach everyone—from the novice jazz fan to the advanced student and everyone in between.”

Dyas taught a group at the Escuela Nacional de Arte. “I presented a clinic on how to learn the standard jazz repertoire—from listening to the definitive recordings to memorizing the chord progressions and heads to transcribing,” Dyas explained. “The Cuban students soaked it up like sponges. And when we all played a tune at the end of the

session, the vibe was electric.”

Regina Carter, who performed at the all-star concert and presented a violin workshop to a group of students at the Instituto Superior de Arte, was impressed by the teenagers’ eagerness and prodigious talents. “Their hunger for learning, no matter how much they knew—and they are extremely educated—was inspiring,” she said.

Tom Carter, president of the Monk Institute, views these educational efforts as a gateway to future cultural exchanges: “We’re planning on bringing some of our students from our college program in UCLA to Cuba for some weeklong programs. We also hope to bring some music teachers here and bring some of the Cuban teachers to the U.S.”

“Last year, when we [performed at the Jazz Day all-star concert] at the White House, I remember thinking, ‘Man, it’s going to be hard topping that, with President Obama being there,’” Miller recalled.

“When they announced [Havana as the host city], I thought it was great because it was almost like a continuation. Thanks to the efforts of the Obama administration, the communication lines between Cuba and the U.S. are opened back up.” **DB**