

Herbie Hancock launches International Jazz Day in Paris, New Orleans, and NY

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It's not like **Herbie Hancock** needed something else on his resume.

At 72, he still tours the world with his quartet, and continues to turn out high-concept albums with apparent ease. Witness his 2010 GRAMMY®-winning, world-music mash-up *The Imagine Project* and before that, *River: The Joni Letters*, which won the top prize in 2008 – the GRAMMY for Album of the Year (one of Hancock's total of 14 little Victrola statues).

He could rest on his considerable laurels as one of the five or six most influential jazz pianists of the last half-century, as well as an important influence in pop and dance music during the 70s and 80s. Instead he has taken on such gigs as Creative Chair for Jazz at the L.A. Philharmonic – a consultancy on jazz programs to the orchestra association – and chairing the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, a major player in the field of jazz education and professional competition.

So it's not like Herbie Hancock needed something else to fill his time.

But when the opportunity arose for this Chicago native to become a Goodwill Ambassador for UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), there was no way he could turn it down. Hancock accepted that post last July, and his first initiative has been to create the first annual *International Jazz Day*, April 30 (Monday). That date coincides with the designation (in 2001) of April as Jazz Appreciation Month in the U.S. But *International Jazz Day* seeks to build upon Jazz Appreciation Month in using jazz as an educational and diplomatic tool throughout the world.

Hancock kicked off the inaugural celebration on Friday, April 27, with a daylong series of educational programs and an evening concert at UNESCO headquarters in Paris; there he was joined by a bevy of jazz giants, among them vocalists **Dee Dee Bridgewater** and **Tania Maria**, bassist **Marcus Miller**, guitarist **Lionel Loueke**, and recent GRAMMY winner **Terri Lyne Carrington**.

On Monday morning, the celebration moves to New Orleans for a sunrise concert (7 AM Chicago time), with a host of the Crescent City's finest on hand – including trumpeters **Terence Blanchard** and **Kermit Ruffins**, pianist **Ellis Marsalis**, and the **Treme Brass Band**, along with singer **Dianne Reeves** – and then, Monday evening, to New York, where the list of guest performers list grows to Bunyanesque proportions.

That night, at the UN General Assembly Hall in New York (6:30 Chicago time), Hancock will preside over a constellation of jazz and world-music stars. The lineup includes vocalists Bridgewater, Reeves, **Angelique Kidjo** (of Benin), and **Shankar Mahadevan** (India);

drummer **Jack DeJohnette**; bassists **Esperanza Spalding, Christian McBride**, and **Richard Bona** (of Cameroon); pianists **Danilo Perez** (Panama) and **Hiromi Uehara** (Japan); trumpeters **Wynton Marsalis** and **Hugh Masekela** (of South Africa) and sax great **Wayne Shorter**; percussionist **Zakir Hussain** (India); blues couple **Derek Trucks** and **Susan Tedeschi**; and classical pianist **Lang Lang** (China).

The quasi-legendary keys man **George Duke** will serve as musical director, and the evening's cohosts include **Morgan Freeman, Robert DeNiro**, and **Quincy Jones**. Even the much decorated and widely experienced Hancock agrees that his has shaped up into a career highlight in a lifetime filled with them.

Both Monday concerts will video-stream live, at www.jazzday.com and www.monkinstitute.org.

Your Chicago Jazz Examiner got to talk with the pianist a week before the commotion began.

EXAMINER: *How did your UNESCO appointment come about in the first place?*

HERBIE HANCOCK: I first connected with UNESCO about eight years ago, when the Monk Institute was asked to put together a performance to close out their "Philosophy Day" at UNESCO headquarters. They wanted something cool, because, I mean – Philosophy Day? You know how heavy *they* can get.

We did that for three or four years, and during that time I got to know Mika Shino at UNESCO, and whenever we talked, it was like a brainstorming session. Somehow the idea came up of me being appointed Goodwill Ambassador – and just the fact that she would come up with that blew me away. It took another four or five years for the whole thing to transpire.

What do you hope the International Jazz Day activities will accomplish?

HH: I'm not really bound by anything, but when I signed on, I had to give a short phrase that would kind of capture my intentions. And I said then, I hope to use dialogue and culture as a means of bringing people of various cultures together, and using that as a way to resolve conflict.

That sounds like the inspiration behind your 2010 album The Imagine Project, which brought together musicians from five continents. You said then that you wanted to express the global unity of all peoples.

HH: Actually, *The Imagine Project* and my UNESCO appointment, it's all part of my life evolving toward that goal. It's all bound up together; it's part of what I view as a direction toward making a contribution in service to humanity. The music is part of that, and also however else I might be able to be of service – through speeches, programs, and encouragement.

Among the goals set in the International Jazz Day announcement is to "Encourage exchange and understanding between cultures" and to "Recognize jazz as a universal language of freedom." Can you give me an idea of what specific form these might

take?

HH: One of the most important functions of jazz has been to encourage a hope for freedom, for people living in situations of intolerance or struggle. In World War II, jazz absolutely was the music of freedom, and then in the Cold War, behind the Iron Curtain, same thing. It was all underground; but they needed the food of freedom that jazz offered. Even the very idea of an “International Jazz Day” calls attention to the fact that jazz for many years has had a diplomatic function.

You mean the way that such artists as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and Dizzy Gillespie traveled on behalf of the U.S. government to bring their music to people around the world?

HH: Yes. And actually, I didn’t want to my limit activities to music, because that’s not the only thing I’m capable of doing. One thing I had been thinking about from the start is having panel discussions or symposiums, say in a university, where students from countries that are involved in conflict, such as the middle east, can just talk – because very often it’s a misunderstanding or misinformation about a culture outside of one’s own that is at the root of intolerance. This can start with music, but certainly I don’t have to be stuck there.

Another goal set by UNESCO is to use jazz to “promote intercultural dialogue toward the eradication of racial tensions and gender inequality.” Specifically, how might that take shape?

HH: The simplest idea that comes to mind is a band that has girls in it. That’s not something you or I might look at as an example, because jazz has already transcended that in a sense. People attending the concerts are not even aware of it; they’re enjoying the music and then they look around and see it’s not just guys on the stage. So then it becomes obvious that great value has been created by emphasizing equality.

Now that you’re an official appointee of the U.N., do I need to address you as “Mr. Ambassador”?

HH: You know, I went to some functions in Cambodia and Indonesia, as a representative of UNESCO, and officially I was addressed as “Your Excellency.” I was shocked. That’s only at certain functions – it’s a courtesy thing among ambassadors. And I’m not an actual “ambassador” in the sense of coming from a specific country. In fact, all the other ambassadors from UNESCO represent their own countries, but a Goodwill Ambassador represents the world.

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