

Herbie Hancock's vision of an International Jazz Day comes to fruition

By CHRIS BARTON — Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — Have you started your International Jazz Day shopping yet?

A global collaboration among the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Herbie Hancock and the Thelonious Monk Institute, the first International Jazz Day is scheduled for Monday. Envisioned as a day of education and performance, the celebration actually begins Friday with a concert in Paris that features jazz luminaries such as Hancock, Hugh Masekela and Terri Lyne Carrington.

The day itself aims to deliver 24 hours of jazz around the world, including in Los Angeles with a jazz session at Herb Alpert's club Vibrato in Bel-Air on Monday night featuring a variety of local artists, including Anthony Wilson, Bob Sheppard and Peter Erskine.

The day begins with a sunrise concert at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and closes at sunset with another all-star show at the U.N. General Assembly Hall. Both shows will feature the day's mastermind, Hancock, who is also the Los Angeles Philharmonic's creative chair for jazz.

Q. How did International Jazz Day come together?

A. Last year I was appointed goodwill ambassador to UNESCO, and the first proposal that I made was for UNESCO to establish an international jazz day. And it was unanimously approved by all 195 member nations. They were very excited about it; it went through without a hitch. And there are a lot of jazz fans who are ambassadors to UNESCO too, by the way. One guy who's the ambassador from Sri Lanka? Huge jazz fan. And you think, Sri Lanka, how's that possible?

Q. What made you feel that now was the time for an international jazz day?

A. Actually, it's an annual event, this is just the first. April 30 from now on will be International Jazz Day; this is serious. I guess you could compare it to a holiday — a day of celebration that will be an annual recognition of jazz as an international music, of course born in America.

Q. One of the goals listed for the day was to emphasize the cultural exchange with the music around the world. But what is it about jazz that makes it especially well suited to that?

A. Well, look at the history of jazz and the role that it played in instilling hope for freedom during the second World War. In a film I was involved in, "Round Midnight," one of the main characters was this Frenchman who had gone to war, and jazz was the music that saved him. What happened was he went AWOL, and his whole troop got wiped out, but he's alive because he left. And he attributes jazz to saving his life. ... People feel the freedom in the music.

Q. As you think about the day, what do you hope is gained as of May 1? Is it about gaining new fans or galvanizing existing ones?

A. First of all, just the recognition by the planet that jazz is a music to celebrate. That it's a great music to recognize as being truly international and truly a positive diplomatic force because of its cultural contributions.

Q. Does jazz seem as healthy as ever right now?

A. It is, in the most important ways. I'm seeing so many young people that are involved with jazz, with jazz bands either in their high school or some other organization. They're popping up everywhere. Teenagers, already improvising. It's not going away. We may not hear it that much on the radio or see it that much on television, but it's happening. It's absolutely happening. And judging from what I've heard from the creative output of some of these young people, the future looks very bright for jazz.

Q. There's an incredible number of people playing in New York, New Orleans and Paris — how did you pull people together for that?

A. It was through the work of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz because I've been involved with that from the beginning, but also the president, Tom Carter, who has produced various shows in the past for the institute. We were so thrilled that the U.N. agreed to having the space there to host the event ... it really is an historic event.

Q. You're performing two shows in one day, one in New Orleans and the other in New York City. Have you ever done anything like that before?

A. I don't think so.

Q. You're going to be a busy man.

A. Oh, yeah. (Laughs) So what else is new?

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www.unesco.org/days/jazzday

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