

# International Jazz Day brings Hancock and Blanchard to Congo Square

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On Sunday, April 22, legendary pianist Herbie Hancock and New Orleans own renowned trumpeter Terence Blanchard will again perform at historic Congo Square for a special kick-off edition of the global celebration of International Jazz Day (April 30). The two prominent jazz musicians, as well as an array of other artists, were there in 2012 for the inaugural Jazz Day, which is presented annually

by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. The goal of International Jazz Day, which is recognized through participation in 190 countries, is to “acknowledge jazz’s propensity to unite the people of the world and remind them of the humanity we all share.”



Hancock and Blanchard will share the stage at the multi-faceted celebration as well as perform in different configurations. Students from the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) are scheduled to play with the Hancock and Blanchard is set to lead his entire E-Collective ensemble. Guests at the free concert, which begins at 2 p.m., include vocalists Ledisi and Patti Austin.

## HERBIE HANCOCK

“I really think that jazz in particular is adept at bringing people together,” Hancock, UNESCO’s goodwill ambassador and the Monk Institute’s chairman, said back in 2012. “Jazz is a true representative of freedom and creativity because it’s in the moment, it’s improvised and there’s teamwork involved in that process. It’s about sharing rather than competition.”

“I definitely agree with all of that,” Blanchard offers. “The other part of it that should be talked about is that there’s planning. There’s planning in terms of the arrangements that you’re going to play and in what sequence you’re going to play the music. That all comes together to make a strong presentation along with improvisation.”

“The reason I say planning is important,” Blanchard continues, “is because, to me, it is an example of how we move forward as a society. We don’t just want to jump up there and start improvising. We want to improvise with a plan saying that this is what we’re trying to do, this is where we’re trying to go. We’re trying to be more inclusive i.e. taking down the (Confederate) monuments. We want to move forward with having a more inclusive society in terms of who we put in political office. Once we have those things in place and have an ideology that includes everybody then, of course, improvisation of dealing with things that happen at the moment is imperative.”

During the 2012 interview with Hancock he spoke about the hope that music can bring to people mentioning those who lived behind the Iron Curtain and found salvation in listening to the radio tuned to “Voice of America.”

“I met a lot of people who said that jazz really saved them from going batty,” Hancock recalled. “It kept them sane and with a sense of hope for the future. Because of their circumstances, people in other parts of the world already know jazz’s importance because they’ve experienced it. It’s been the voice of freedom for them.”



“Of course, I always think there’s a sense of hope,” Blanchard agrees. “I also think there’s a sense of allowing people to vent. I think jazz is all of those things. When you look at the music that we’re doing on my latest album, *Live*, we’re trying to let people vent and at the same time we’re trying to be optimistic. It’s a cliché by now, but the song that Louis Armstrong did, “What a Wonderful World,” resonated with a lot of people. At the same time, listen to John Coltrane’s “Alabama.” While it was very mournful, through the mourning, for me, there was a certain power about it. There was a type of strength in it that I found hopeful and uplifting.”

## TERRENCE BLANCHARD

Asked if he recalled the first International Jazz Day that he played at Congo Square, Blanchard had an initial reaction that echoes that of most anyone who attended the concert.

“Are you kidding?” Blanchard asked in disbelief, recalling the extremely unusual hour of 7 a.m. that the show got underway. “I remember getting up in the morning and wondering, ‘Why are we doing this? Nobody’s going to be there this early in the morning.’ And sure enough there was a crowd. Everybody was excited to hear Herbie Hancock. It was kind of like Mardi Gras in the way that there was a very communal atmosphere. Then we (he and Hancock) got on a plane and flew straight to New York and played at the United Nations.”

“Jazz grew out of the African-American experience,” Hancock noted prior to the first International Jazz Day concert. “However the importance of jazz is not so much that it has some descriptive elements of the African-American experience. It’s more about the fact that it demonstrates human beings’ ability to take the worst of circumstances — slavery, intolerance and discrimination — and rather than turn that into conflict and violence, make it into something that is creative and uplifting. The human spirit has the capacity to do that. I think that’s why people throughout the world respond to jazz. That’s the freedom that is theirs. The freedom of the human experience transcends race. It comes from the human spirit that we all have. It’s African-Americans’ gift to the world.”

Particularly as a native of New Orleans, Blanchard is acutely aware of Congo Square’s significance to this city’s culture and ultimately to the world. Unlike other places in the United States during the time of slavery, those in bondage and free men and women of color were allowed to express and enjoy their African traditions. On Sundays in Congo Square they could play their drums, dance and trade and sell goods in what is now considered a sacred site.

“It couldn’t be in a more appropriate place (for the event) because of the history of Congo Square and what it’s meant for some many generations and what it was initially used for and what it’s come to represent,” Blanchard offers. “The history of Congo Square directly aligns with the evolution of jazz. When you think about it, out of the depths of so much pain and sorrow and suffering, came something very beautiful. Congo Square is now a meeting place for people to regenerate their souls.”

“Music has a way of breaking you down,” Blanchard continues. “You can come to any event with a certain type of attitude or belief system, but sometimes when the music starts to play, it breaks all of your emotions down. It tears away at the façade that most people will use to protect themselves emotionally. Jazz is a slippery beast,” Blanchard declares, then laughs. “It doesn’t allow itself to be categorized.”

“With the passing of Cecil Taylor, man, we are losing a shining example of individuality,” Blanchard says with much sadness on remarking on the death on April 5, 2018 of the 89-year-old legendary pianist. “We are losing one of the bravest souls to ever walk the planet playing this music. One of the things that I’ve always loved about Cecil Taylor is that he was just totally uncompromising about life. His thing was this is who I am, this is what I feel. By his passion being so strong, it allowed us to dream and envision all of the musical palate.”

The Congo Square performances will be streamed world-wide on April 30, 2018 as the lead United States portion of the global celebration of International Jazz Day.

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