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Jazz takes centre stage in Chicago for 2026





Unsplash/Chris Dickens | The city of Chicago.

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Chicago has been named host city for the 2026 [International Jazz Day](#) festivities - coinciding with the 15th anniversary of the event and the 250th anniversary of the United States.

The [announcement](#)  came from UN culture agency ([UNESCO](#) ) on Wednesday, as this year's day was being celebrated in the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Abu Dhabi.

The focus there [↗](#) was on 'Arabic Jazz', a tapestry of musical traditions, which included the use of classical instruments from the region such as the oud, qanun and ney.

Following the jazz synthesis which ended on a high note in the UAE, the spotlight now turns to Chicago – where many would argue the golden era of jazz began as pioneers from New Orleans headed north during the 1920s.

The midwestern city will host the renowned *All-Star Global Concert*, directed by UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock, featuring some of the world's most celebrated jazz artists.

“What better way for UNESCO to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the United States than by sharing its rich musical heritage with the world?” said Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO's Director-General.

Rich jazz pedigree

Chicago has played a pivotal role in the evolution of the genre for over a century. In the 1920s, musicians journeyed up the Mississippi and found in Chicago a vibrant creative hub. Legends like Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, and Jelly Roll Morton helped define the “Chicago style” of jazz – marked by bold solos, improvisation, big band arrangements, and the rising prominence of the saxophone.

Today, the city remains a stronghold of jazz culture, home to renowned events such as the Chicago Jazz Festival and iconic venues including the Green Mill and the Jazz Showcase, which has been a cornerstone of the scene for 75 years.



UN Photo/JC McIlwaine | Multiple Grammy Award-winning jazz pianist and Goodwill Ambassador for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Herbie Hancock, performs at the inaugural International Jazz Day Concert at UN Headquarters. (2012)

UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock, a native of Chicago, reflected on what jazz has meant to him.

"It was in my high school auditorium in Chicago that I discovered jazz – an experience that ignited a lifelong passion," he said. "Jazz opened doors to creativity, self-expression, and freedom."

Events throughout the year

In addition to the Global Concert, Chicago will host a range of events throughout 2026 to celebrate International Jazz Day, including concerts, educational programmes, discussions, and community activities.

These will be organized in collaboration with the Chicago Jazz Alliance, the Ravinia Festival, the City of Chicago, the Illinois Arts Council, the State of Illinois, and other partners.

Launched by UNESCO in 2011, International Jazz Day is observed annually on April 30 in over 190 countries. It celebrates the power of jazz as a force for peace, intercultural dialogue, and human dignity.

7 minutes with Marcus Miller

