

International Jazz Day in Abu Dhabi a Learning Experience for All Involved

By John Murph | May. 5, 2025

UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Herbie Hancock (left) performs "Chameleon" at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert in Abu Dhabi, UAE, with Elena Pinderhughes, Oran Etkin, Terri Lyne Carrington, John Patitucci, Etienne Charles, Tomoaki Baba, Tia Fuller and Nils Landgren. (Photo: Steve Munding)

This year's edition of International Jazz Day served as its most peculiar chapter so far as jazz luminaries from various regions of the globe — including the U.S., Panama, Japan, China, Morocco, Iraq and India — swarmed down on Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which hosted the annual event's main April 30 concert. With its luxurious architecture that blends modern skyscrapers and high-end shopping malls with the posh Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the UAE Presidential Palace and beautiful beaches, it's the perfect playground for the well-heeled. For all of Abu Dhabi's opulence, it's understandable why any jazz musician or organization would want to benefit from its lavish trappings. However, when it came to jazz from a grassroots level, the music was a rare commodity.

Instead of building on a solid historical anchor to achieve the Herbie Hancock Institute and UNESCO's mission of fostering global goodwill through the power of jazz, it appeared as if the institute was attempting to construct a jazz anchor from the ground up, alongside Berklee Abu Dhabi and New York University Abu Dhabi.

"This is a region that has had limited exposure to jazz," said Tom Carter, executive director of the Hancock Institute, when asked about the music's presence in Abu Dhabi. "Part of our commitment with International Jazz Day is to go to all regions of world and expand audiences. So, it's important for us to go to other locations and introduce them to jazz. What we found here is that it's as much of a learning experience for us as it for them."



Carter also seemed to be banking on Abu Dhabi's increasing multicultural population in hopes that people migrating from such places as China, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Ethiopia, Taiwan and the Philippines will bring a healthy appetite and demand for jazz.

"In Abu Dhabi, there are [more than] 150 nationalities," Carter claimed. "It's a city that's sort of a microcosm of the world. Like United States, it's a country of immigrants. And many of their first generation come with a love of jazz from their various homelands."

Herbie Hancock, the institute's longtime chairman and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, shared the *pro forma* sentiments associated with International Jazz Day, as did Mohamad Khalifa Al Mubarak, chairman of Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism, and Ernesto Ottone R., UNESCO's assistant director-general for Culture. Both at the majestic Qasr Al Watan (the official presidential palace of the UAE, before the main concert) and at the colossal Etihad Arena, they talked about the diplomatic and humanitarian power jazz has in uniting cultures across the world.

Mubarak spoke of jazz's influence on the "global landscape." "[Abu Dhabi], a vibrant crossroads of tradition and modernity, provides the perfect backdrop for reflecting on jazz's unique ability to bring people together, transcending borders and language, through its improv spirit and rich history," he said at the global concert. He continued by proclaiming Abu Dhabi as an "UNESCO city of music."

As for the main concert, the all-star celebration showcased some of the event's longstanding musicians such as bassists Marcus Miller and Linda May Han Oh; drummer Terri Lyne Carrington; pianist A Bu; guitarist John McLaughlin; and singers Dee Dee Bridgewater and Dianne Reeves. Actor Jeremy Irons returned for the second time as host, while the set list took International Jazz Day's standard position of being phenomenally apolitical in favor of bebop, Latin and jazz-fusion chestnuts with nods to blues and pop.

The concert opened with its most noticeable affirmation of Arabian music: "Welcome To Country," an enchanting diaphanous piece featuring Hancock, Iraq-born oud master Naseer Shamma and Moroccan percussionist Rhani Krija. That gave way to a turbo-charged rendering of B.B. King's signature tune, "The Thrill Is Gone," featuring Bridgewater challenging the raspy urgency of Bettye Lavette in front of a rollicking ensemble that included Carrington, Miller, Beasley and guitarists McLaughlin, Leonard Brown and John Pizzarelli.

From there, the concert kept a mostly energetic, sanguine nature with scintillating solos from trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, pianist Danilo Pérez and tenor saxophonist David Sánchez on a sauntering take on Dizzy Gillespie's Cubop classic "Tin Tin Deo,"; Indian singer Varijashree Venugopal's blistering virtuosic improvisation on a fast-paced reading of John Coltrane's "Giant Steps"; José James' swank performance of the Rolling Stones' "Miss You"; and a funky rubdown of the Hancock's classic "Chameleon."

The concert's standout performances included a transfixing reading of McLaughlin's "As The Spirit Sings," on which the guitarist unleashed his patented razor-edge improvisations and soulful melodicism, matched by Japanese saxophonist Tomoaki Baba's full-throttle solo. The seminal Kenny Barron got to shine as a commanding pianist and composer with a no-nonsense take of his modern post-bop gem "Voyage," which also featured feisty trumpet and saxophone work, respectively, from Etienne Charles and Sánchez. And Reeves' soul-stirring interpretation of George and Ira Gershwin's "Someone To Watch Over Me" featured an amazing alto saxophone contribution from Tia Fuller.

One of the greatest moments of the evening, however, wasn't a musical performance; it was Bridgewater giving a huge shout-out to all the women musicians onstage. She name-checked all of the aforementioned women as well others such as flutist Elena Pinderhughes, pianist Hélène Mercier, singers Janis Siegel and

Darynn Dean, Elham Al Marzooqi (UAE's first professional cellist) and Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO's director general.

"Tonight, I want to acknowledge the presence of all the kind, loving women who have graced this stage," saluted Bridgewater before roll-calling their names. "You all remind us of that the old cliché that jazz [is] a boys' club has been broken. And in its place, a culture of respect, love, creativity and bold, uncompromising artistry."

Then, Bridgewater gave a major appreciation to Michelle Day, who has served as the Hancock Institute's vice-president of operations for 28 years. "She is the heart, soul and engine of *this* very show," Bridgewater said of Day. "[She's] a powerhouse who brings grace, grit and love to every note we celebrate tonight." Bridgewater's speech gave way to an incredible performance led by country-blues singer and songwriter Ruthie Foster, who delivered her sashaying "Take It Easy."

An all-hands-on-deck take on John Lennon's "Imagine" once again served as the finale, with major of featured musicians taking a jab at the melody in round-robin fashion. At the close of the concert, it was announced that Chicago will serve as the host city for next year. As a city filled with both historical and future-forward jazz treasures as well as blues, funk, soul, deep house and hip-hop — as well as being Hancock's hometown — Chicago is not only a superb choice; it's a sensible one. **DB**