

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

Retrieved from: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/music/2026/05/01/chicago-international-jazz-day-pope-leo-herbie-hancock-kurt-elling-lyric-opera-on-Jun-8,2026>

Herbie Hancock and ‘wingman’ Kurt Elling turned International Jazz Day finale into a love letter to Chicago

THE SHOW AT THE LYRIC OPERA HOUSE, STREAMED GLOBALLY, INCLUDED AN APPEARANCE BY GOV. JB PRITZKER, A PERFORMANCE BY BUDDY GUY, A TRIBUTE TO QUINCY JONES AND REMARKS READ ON BEHALF OF POPE LEO XIV.

By Erica Thompson | May 1, 2026, 4:25pm GMT+1



Chicago vocalist Kurt Elling performs Thursday with an all-star band at the International Jazz Day Global Concert at the Lyric Opera House. Timothy Hiatt/For The Sun-Times

Before the UNESCO International Jazz Day Global Concert kicked off on Thursday night, the Lyric Opera House buzzed with excitement.

“I’m giddy,” said Elizabeth Sprattling, 60, of Chicago Heights, who has loved the art form since she was in diapers.

“My dad put my bassinet between two speakers and played jazz. It’s been a big part of my whole life.”



Herbie Hancock co-hosted the evening and performed on piano. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times

Sprattling was one of the lucky audience members who snagged a coveted complimentary ticket with the help of her cousin, an artist who participated in the monthlong International Jazz Day festivities across the city. More than half of the roughly 3,000 seats were reserved for local creatives, students, educators and the general public, who registered online for a chance to get in.

Despite that demand, those on the waitlist who showed up anyway were admitted , and some seats were empty at showtime. Still, there was a generous audience of passionate music lovers of all ages and backgrounds taking in the celebration, which was led by International Jazz Day co-founder Herbie Hancock. The Chicago native also served as co-artistic director with local jazz legend Kurt Elling, who affectionately called himself “Herbie Hancock’s wingman” when he took the stage.

What followed were performances by more than 40 renowned artists — an event that those who witnessed it live called an exceptional experience.

Though streamed online to millions around the world, it had special meaning to Chicagoans: an appearance by Gov. JB Pritzker; a wealth of Chicago talent, including Buddy Guy; remarks read on behalf of Pope Leo XIV; and tributes to Chicago legends. The night was truly a love letter to this city, a first-time host of the traveling annual celebration.

Pope Leo praised the event for underscoring music's ability to "foster dialogue, mutual understanding and solidarity," according to a letter submitted by Cardinal Christophe Pierre, read aloud by singer Dee Dee Bridgewater.



*Lizz Wright and Chicago's United Voices youth choir perform at the International Jazz Day Global Concert.
Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times*

"As the world continues to yearn for peace and fraternity, occasions such as this offer a valuable reminder of the power of culture and the arts to build bridges," the letter stated.

That sentiment was also expressed by Hancock, who spoke about jazz's success in crossing borders and breaking down walls. He also said he was happy to bring the event to Chicago.

"There's something special about coming home," Hancock said from the stage. "It just feels different."



Chicago jazz saxophonist Ernest Dawkins was among the lineup of renowned performers at last week's International Jazz Day Global Concert at Lyric Opera House. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times

It's been a busy week in Chicago for Hancock, 86, who now lives in West Hollywood. The jazz icon participated on a panel about film scoring, received the key to the city and visited his alma mater, Hyde Park Academy. The audience was shown footage of Hancock walking the once-cobblestone alleys of the South Side, where the "watermelon man" rolled through selling his fruit. Hancock then took the stage to perform his 1962 hit song named for the vendor.

More poignant Chicago moments followed, including Jacob Collier's tribute to hometown hero Quincy Jones on piano. A self-proclaimed lover of "illegal chords," Collier performed a unique rendition of Michael Jackson's "She's Out of My Life," which Jones produced. Next, Chicago's Uniting Voices youth choir joined singer Lizz Wright onstage.

A highlight was Elling's frenetic cover of "Dat Dere," with lyrics written by Chicago poet and Chicago Literary Hall of Fame inductee Oscar Brown Jr., who would have turned 100 years old this year. (Bobby Timmons was the composer.)

Elling was backed by Chicago saxophonist, composer and educator Ernest Dawkins, who followed the performance with his own rousing number. He was joined by Dee Alexander on lead vocals, DePaul graduate Marquis Hill on trumpet, rising star Frank Morrison on drums and

more. They paid homage to the experimental Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, founded 60 years ago in the city.

“Welcome to Chicago,” Alexander sang from the stage.



Chicago pianist Jahari Stampley performs at the International Jazz Day Global Concert. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times

Performers from outside of the city also brought their A-game. Pianist Robert Glasper energized the audience with his hip-hop-flavored set; singer Dianne Reeves brought some to their feet with her soulful rendition of “In a Sentimental Mood”; and bassist Marcus Miller lent his talent to performances of the jazz standard “Caravan,” as well as “Tutu,” which he wrote for Miles Davis.

Audience member Loryn Kimbrough was delighted by the packed lineup, which she didn’t discover until she sat down and thumbed through the program at the beginning of the show.

“I’m really surprised,” said Kimbrough, 42, of Blue Island, who said it was her first time at the Lyric Opera House. “If it were not for my partner, I would not have known about this event. And I definitely think that there are so many people, especially South Siders, who could benefit from the opportunity of being here.”



Chicago hosted a series of events around jazz in the days leading up to the concert. A weekend event about Bronzeville's jazz history drew Ryan Platte (left), a classics researcher at Northwestern University, pictured here discussing the historical details of a stage backdrop reproduction with Myron Stokes inside the historic Forum Hall. Victor Hilitski/For the Chicago Sun-Times

During the week, others have commented their neighbors hadn't heard about International Jazz Day being in Chicago, though organizers curated events throughout the city. Programming included everything from a "Neighborhood Jazz Night" of multiple concerts on the South and West sides to a walking tour of jazz-related landmarks in Bronzeville.

But the city could do even more to make itself known as a jazz capital, according to insiders, who said they are already thinking of ways to keep the momentum of International Jazz Day going.

"I couldn't believe that it's never been here before," Sprattling said of the global celebration. "Jazz is so much a part of Chicago. I feel like it's home. It should be here."

Editor's note: This story has been updated to add that Bobby Timmons composed "Dat Dere." The lyrics were written by Oscar Brown.



Bela Fleck (left) and Chicago blues guitarist Buddy Guy perform. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times



The ensemble of performers closes out the International Jazz Day Global Concert at the Lyric Opera House. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times



Dianne Reeves performs at the International Jazz Day Global Concert at the Lyric Opera House. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times



Dee Dee Bridgewater and Gregory Porter perform at the International Jazz Day Global Concert at the Lyric Opera House. Timothy Hiatt/For the Sun-Times