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International Jazz Day's Chicago Serenade

By Frank Alkyer | May. 5, 2026



Kurt Elling performs "Dat Dere" during the IJD Concert. (Photo: Michael Jackson)

For those around the globe who celebrated International Jazz Day on April 30, the occasion, as usual, seemed like a very cool "Hallmark" holiday, an annual ritual to embrace this music's traditions of freedom, experimentation and community. But for those of us living in Chicago, IJD this year was extra special. That's because Chicago served as the host city for the 15th annual celebration, a collaboration of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.

The event has been hosted in a new city around the globe each year — Paris, Istanbul, Osaka, Havana and last year in Abu Dhabi, to name a few. But this year it was Chicago's turn, in part because of Chicago's deep jazz tradition, but in larger part because Herbie Hancock — one of IJD's key founders — was raised here.

Celebrated in 196 countries around the globe and in all 50 states, International Jazz Day truly turned out in Chicago in a way that made even the crustiest of old jazz professionals (yes, including this writer) smile and beam with pride about the music this city delivers.

A week's worth of panels, meetings and performances sparkled across the city and into the surrounding suburbs. Hancock went back to Hyde Park Academy, his old high school, to meet with students and receive a key to the city. Orbert Davis' Chicago Jazz Philharmonic performed Miles Davis' *Sketches Of Spain* at the Logan Center for the Arts. Later, at that same venue, Antonio Sánchez performed his Birdman Live set featuring music he created for that movie. Just to name a few events.

But on April 30, the organizers offered an amazing capstone, the International Jazz Day Global Concert that pulled together scores of today's biggest jazz stars.

Dee Dee Bridgewater and Gregory Porter dug into Ramsey Lewis' "The In Crowd" to kick off the proceedings. Herbie Hancock told the audience that to understand jazz, you need to know the blues, bringing out Chicago's own Buddy Guy with Cristone "Kingfish" Ingram and Béla Fleck to play Guy's "Damn Right I've Got The Blues." Lizz Wright and pianist Helen Sung were joined by the Uniting Voices Chicago choir to take us to church with "Seems Like I'm Never Tired Lovin' You." Dianne Reeves just charmed with "In A Sentimental Mood." Members of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) welcomed the audience to Chicago with Dee Alexander on vocals and Dr. Ernest Dawkins leading a crowd-pleasing group. And John Beasley eloquently guided the proceedings with his arrangements and musical direction.

That's just scratching the surface. The show also included a calvalcade of Chicago and international stars — Bobby Broom, Kurt Elling (who helped bring IJD to Chicago), Marquis Hill, Ed Wilkerson, Ben Lamar Gay, Robert Glasper, Christian McBride, Terri Lyne Carrington, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Marcus Miller, James Carter, Til Brönner, Mino Cinélu, Emmet Cohen, Kris Bowers, Justin Tyson, Burniss "Boom Bishop" Travis II, James Morrison, Tiger Okoshi, Joel Ross, Jahari Stampley Francisco Torres, Bobby Watson, Jacob Collier and on and on. Whew.

When Elling began singing the show's finale, an upbeat take on John Lennon's "Imagine," it seemed tangential, but as the evening's stars amassed on stage, seeing one after another, it made sense. Imagine a community of jazz gathering yearly to shout out our love for this music, the people who make it and fans who live by it.

It happened. And it was beautiful.

Catch the entire show at jazzday.com. **DB**