

Review: International Jazz Day Global Concert Crowns Chicago as a Heritage Site for Jazz

Kathy D. Hey | May 5, 2026

I had been waiting for this day since Herbie Hancock announced it at his fifth Chicago Symphony performance. Hancock and Kurt Elling have been lobbying UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) to designate the city as a jazz heritage site. I didn't take it all in until I walked into the Lyric Opera House and saw Hancock's Fazioli grand piano on the stage. International Jazz Day on April 30 made history. Hancock calls Chicago the "spiritual home of jazz," and that is the truth. Jazz originated in the blues, and while its roots are in New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta, jazz took root in Chicago 15 years into the 20th century. Both world wars and both waves of Black migration made Chicago their home, and also the home to jazz and blues music. International Jazz Day was simulcast on YouTube to over 130 countries worldwide.



Bela Fleck and Buddy Guy. Photo courtesy of the Herbie Hancock Jazz Institute.

The concert featured the greatest jazz musicians in America and from other countries, including the UK and Brazil. I have seen almost every musician on that stage play live, and I have definitely enjoyed

the music from all of them. Congratulatory greetings were bestowed upon the International Jazz Day Global Celebration from some super cool people. Pope Leo sent a special message and blessings to the city. The Holy Father received an invitation but was, understandably, otherwise occupied. His reflections on music as a "path of beauty" were an invitation to promote the values of listening, creativity, and respect for music. It was a timely reminder that music is a universal language and it can bring love and respect to those who choose to be a part of it.

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker received a loud and hearty welcome when he walked to the podium. Mayor Brandon Johnson sent his congratulations and had earlier awarded Herbie Hancock the Key to the city. There was also a lovely greeting from Khaled El-Enany, the Director General of UNESCO. The message from everyone, including Hancock, is that we can build a better world through music. Dialogues, lasting friendships, and peaceful relationships can be formed through the power of music.

The concert opened with Dee Dee Bridgewater and Gregory Porter dueting on "The In Crowd." Chicago native Ramsey Lewis's 1965 recording of this song featured another Chicagoan, Maurice White of Earth, Wind & Fire, on drums. After a warmly received message from Governor Pritzker, Hancock took a seat at the Fazioli and lit into "Watermelon Man." The band featured James Carter on sax, Mino Cinélu on percussion, Bobby Broom on guitar, Melissa Aldana on baritone sax, and drummer extraordinaire Terri Lyne Carrington, who played for almost every artist on the program. She was featured with Nicole Mitchell and the Black Earth Ensemble at the Chicago Humanities Festival dialogue with Angela Davis in 2025.

Buddy Guy and Cristone "Kingfish" Ingram took the stage with a ripping rendition of Guy's "Damn Right I got the Blues." Banjo master, Bela Fleck, added a virtuosic banjo solo. Fleck was also a featured soloist with pianist Robert Glasper. It was thrilling to hear Dianne Reeves sing "In a Sentimental Mood." She was backed by Christian McBride on double bass. Her rich contralto held the audience spellbound, recalling Sarah Vaughan's melisma, which ranged from low to high notes. Bia Ferreira brought music from Carangola, Brazil. Ferreira was a serene presence in white, playing guitar and singing in a husky Portuguese.

Chicago's AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) was well-represented with the fabulous Dee Alexander leading a line of musicians, including Ernest Dawkins in an improvisational melange with the tag line, "Welcome to Chicago, We Got It Goin' On." Can someone say a t-shirt and Chicago merch with that phrase on it? Alexander was the lead vocalist in a performance of Yoko Ono's *Skylanding* with *Taiko Legacy 22*.

A gospel-inflected "Seems I'm Never Tired of Lovin' You" was sung by Lizz Wright. It was another swerve into the roots of America's music. She was joined by the Uniting Voices choir, formerly known as the Chicago Children's Choir. They were accompanied by pianist Helen Sung, sounding like a piano from a church on the South or West Side of Chicago. It was a moving and beautiful performance.



International Jazz Day Global Concert performers. Photo courtesy of Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.

I loved the tribute to Quincy Jones, who hosted the first International Jazz Day. Like Hancock, Quincy Jones was born and raised in Chicago. Jones started as a jazz trumpeter and went on to compose or produce some of the greatest music to hit the charts. Dee Dee Bridgewater made an announcement on the centenary of jazz musicians such as Ray Brown, John Coltrane, Tony Bennett, and the indomitable Miles Davis. A funky performance of "Tutu" was performed by the composer of that song, Marcus Miller, on bass, and included Marquis Hill on trumpet, Mino Cinélu on percussion, and Terri Lyne Carrington on the drums. It brought back memories of the '80s, when the beat became louder to end apartheid in South Africa. "Tutu" was about Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who led peaceful resistance and protests and continued to do so even after Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

The finale of this extraordinary concert was a beautiful rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine." Every performer took the stage and performed a song about peace and non-attachment to the things that divide us as humans: religion, possessions, or an afterlife defined by paradise or eternal damnation.

The *International Jazz Day Global Celebration* was brought to Chicago through the efforts of Herbie Hancock, Kurt Elling, UNESCO, and the Jazz Institute of Chicago. It is a proud and well-deserved designation for the city that has nurtured the arts and the people who participate in them.

You can watch the concert on YouTube or the International Jazz Day website. Please visit Hancock Institute of Jazz and UNESCO for more information on jazz, education, and heritage sites around the world. The *International Jazz Day Global Performance* took place on April 30 at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.