

# No Place Like Home: Herbie Hancock Hosts International Jazz Day in His Native Chicago

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*Lyric Opera House, International Jazz Day Chicago, April 30, 2026. Photo credit: Steve Mundinger*

Chicago played host to the 15th annual International Jazz Day, with its rich and still vital musical legacy that includes not only jazz, but electric blues, rock, R&B, funk, hip-hop, deep house and more. The Windy City had the infrastructure, talent and eager fans to help make this edition of International Jazz Day one of the finest yet.

It had been ten years since the main concert was held on U.S. soil, in Washington, DC, at the White House. That edition was marked with melancholy for various reasons. Prince had died the previous week, raising a specter of mourning throughout the world. The musicians saluted his legacy with a medley of his tunes including “1999,” “When Doves Cry” and “Purple Rain.” Also bittersweet at the time was the acknowledgement of President Obama concluding his second term. Aretha Franklin delivered a passionate rendering of Leon Russell’s “A Song for You” earlier that evening. In hindsight, that might be the last year that the White House celebrated jazz. In fact, the Obamas held numerous jazz events — as well as toasting other musical genres — in the People’s House.

Much has changed. The U.S. is led by a profoundly different presidential administration. The world endured a historic global pandemic. New wars have erupted worldwide, including Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Sudan civil war and the U.S.-Iranian war. Rapid advancement of AI has seeped through nearly every fabric of modern life. And, it should be noted, one of the main organizers of International Jazz Day — the Thelonious Monk Jazz Institute — is now named the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz.



*L-R: James Genus, Antonio Sanchez, Béla Fleck. Photo credit: Steve Mundinger*

## Chicago Pride

Throughout a week of related activities, including the April 30 main concert, it wasn't lost on anyone that Chicago is Hancock's hometown. That sense of cultural homecoming for the Institute's chairman and Goodwill Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue for UNESCO — the other main IJD organizer — undoubtedly upped the ante.

On April 29, organizers orchestrated a homecoming at Hancock's alma mater, Hyde Park Academy High School on the South Side. There he was greeted in an auditorium filled with enthusiastic students. After performing one of his signature tunes, "Watermelon Man," with some of the Institute's student players, Hancock told them how he discovered his "passion for jazz" at that very school, after witnessing Don Goldberg, a fellow classmate, improvise on the piano. "The beautiful thing about music is that it teaches us how to listen. It's about expressing yourself while also respecting and uplifting the voices around you," Hancock said to the students. "That begins right here at school."

His words of encouragement continued with a wise reminder of the essential role of "play" in artistic endeavors. "We say, 'We *play* music.' We don't say, 'We *work* music.' Remember that. Don't get me wrong. It takes hard work to get good at something. But you only get great at what you truly enjoy [from] great compassion, from curiosity and the courage to explore. And one of the greatest resources you have for that is actually each other."

While Hancock's beaming presence was felt throughout this year's International Jazz Day, it was also not lost on attendees that Chicago is the hometown of acclaimed singer Kurt Elling, who had long advocated for it to be the host city and who acted as this year's co-artistic director (not long after his star turn as Hermes in Broadway's *Hadestown* came to a close).

For the opening ceremony at the Jay Pritzker Pavillion, Elling performed a wry take on Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" with pianist Helen Sung. Afterward he said, "I have so much gratitude for this moment, for this day... We are thrilled to have you in Chicago. You ain't seen nothing yet. We got it going on here."



*Buddy Guy (right) with Béla Fleck. International Jazz Day Chicago, April 30, 2026. Photo credit: Steve Munding*

### **The Concert**

That city pride carried into the main concert, held at the luxurious Lyric Opera House, featuring mainstay musicians such as drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, bassists James Genus and Christian McBride, singers Dee Dee Bridgewater and Dianne Reeves as well as pianist and musical director John Beasley.

This year's lineup, however, had a significant bloc of Chicago talent including legendary blues guitarist Buddy Guy, vibraphonist Joel Ross, trumpeter Marquis Hill, guitarist Bobby Broom, pianist Jahari Stampley, singer Dee Alexander and saxophonist Ernest Dawkins, among others. The main concert not only honored Chicago's jazz legacy by showcasing some of its luminaries; it saluted the legacies of many of its titans. Gregory Porter joined Bridgewater with a blues-soaked rendition of Billy Page's "The 'In' Crowd," made famous by Ramsey Lewis. In addition to the singers, pianist Kris Bowers tickled some roadhouse-blues-leaning accompaniment and solo, followed by barrelhouse baritone saxophone from James Carter.

Hancock reprised "Watermelon Man" at the concert, but this time in a medley of the hard-bop version and the 1973 jazz-funk variant from the seminal LP *Head Hunters*. Afterward, Hancock

went to the podium and remarked: “I’ve played [on] a lot of stages in life. But there’s something special about coming home.”

The concert gave way to another Chicago tribute — blues legend Buddy Guy performing his hit “Damn Right, I Got the Blues,” which featured razor-sharp guitar work from Guy and heir-apparent Christone “Kingfish” Ingram, as well a rollicking banjo solo from Béla Fleck. Other Chicago-related tributes included pianist and singer Jacob Collier honoring Quincy Jones with an eyebrow-raising mashup of “She’s Out of My Life” (produced by Jones for Michael Jackson’s 1979 classic *Off the Wall*) and Jones’s daffy early-’60s instrumental hit “Soul Bossa Nova” (familiar to younger audiences from the *Austin Powers* movies). Elling delivered a masterclass on song interpretation with his spirited take on “Dat Dere,” in tribute to the late Oscar Brown Jr.



*Lizz Wright with Christian McBride, Terri Lyne Carrington and the United Voices of Chicago Youth Choir. Photo credit: Steve Mundinger*

Vocalist Lizz Wright, who now lives in Chicago and is head chef at the city’s Little Black Pearl Café, was joined by the United Voices of Chicago youth choir and Sung on piano on a glorious, Saturday-night-juke-joint/Sunday-morning-church-praise rendering of Cortez Franklin’s “Seems I’m Never Tired Loving You.”

The biggest and perhaps most surprising tribute to Chicago's jazz legacy came when Elling introduced various members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) such as Dawkins, Hill, Alexander, saxophonist Ed Wilkerson, trumpeter Ben LaMar Gay, pianist Alexis Lombre, bassist Daniel Perez and drummer Frank Morrison IV for a galvanizing excursion into the hypnotic "We Got It Goin' On," on which Alexander led with majestic presence and vocal improvisational wizardry. In the 15 years of International Jazz Day's existence, this passionate and forceful performance was the event's most avant-garde-leaning one yet.



*Bia Ferreira with Leonard Brown. Photo credit: Steve Munding*

Other highlights were less Chicago-centric, such as Robert Glasper leading his working band (bassist Burniss Earl Travis II, drummer Justin Tyson, turntablist Jahi Sundance) as he connected the dots between Thelonious Monk and pioneering hip-hop producer J Dilla. Dianne Reeves offered a mesmeric delivery of Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood," while Brazilian singer and guitarist Bia Ferreira gave a heartfelt performance of her spiritually minded "Antes De Ir." Even though most of the main concert was customarily apolitical, in a world that seems to ablaze with social and political strife, International Jazz Day 2026 delivered a ministry that was superbly crafted and well-received. *JT*