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Chicago shines in the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert

By Nate Chinen | Published May 4, 2026 at 5:39 AM EDT



Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz - A scene from the International Jazz All-Star Global Concert at Lyric Opera of Chicago, April 30, 2026.

CHICAGO — Ten minutes into the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert here on Thursday night, right after a welcoming address from Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, a large screen lowered over the Lyric Opera of Chicago stage. The footage that appeared had been filmed the previous morning, when Herbie Hancock paid a special visit to Hyde Park Academy, his old high school. As a smattering of

students watched from their desks, a teacher asked Hancock about the inspiration for “Watermelon Man,” a tune that has traveled far and wide since appearing on his debut album in 1962.

Hancock recalled the vendor who would pass through the neighborhood with a horse-drawn wagon, and how folks called after him: *Heyyyy, watermelon man!* — a readymade melody. As for the groove: “The alleys in my neighborhood were cobblestone,” he said. “The wagon wheels rolling across the cobblestones would make a sound.”

He demonstrated with a bit of rhythmic vocal percussion, and suddenly there was that rolling piano riff, coming not from the video but from the stage, where Hancock had taken his seat at his customary Fazioli grand. Soon he was joined by James Genus on electric bass, Mino Cinelu on percussion and Terri Lyne Carrington on drums. The melody was handled by a head-turning horn section, with German trumpeter Till Brönner, Chilean tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana, and American alto saxophonist Ernest Dawkins — like Hancock, a son of Chicago’s South Side.

In the casual splendor of the lineup and a series of terrifically pithy solos, the message was clear: this International Jazz Day, the host city of Chicago was as much a main character as any of the notable musicians involved. And for a few of those musicians, it carried heavy resonance, as Hancock made clear in his own welcoming remarks. “You know, I’ve played a lot of stages in my life,” he said with a grin, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the lectern. “But there’s something special about coming home.”

The unbeatably rich and varied musical legacy of the Windy City was a gift that Jazz Day organizers knew better than to squander. Especially coming after last year’s edition in Abu Dhabi — a glittering crossroads of capitalism but hardly a jazz town — this All-Star Global Concert came to play. Musical director John Beasley, working with deft efficiency, folded a festival’s worth of world-class talent into a program that moved and flowed, leaving no room for grandstanding and making few concessions to celebrity.

Royalty, of course, is something else entirely. The electricity in the room was palpable when Hancock announced a Chicago blues segment featuring Buddy Guy, the reigning embodiment of the form, and spiritual godfather of the recent blockbuster *Sinners*. Clad in denim overalls and a branded baseball cap (for Buddy Guy’s Legends, his downtown club), he sang and played one of his anthems, “Damn Right, I’ve Got the Blues,” with a frank and fiery conviction. The all-stars joining him — next-gen bluesman Christone “Kingfish” Ingram, banjoist Béla Fleck, and Carrington — locked into his gravitational pull. A setpiece that could have felt glib or obligatory instead rang with deepest feeling.

The same was true of many other moments in the concert, which opened with Gregory Porter and Dee Dee Bridgewater sharing soulful vocals on “The ‘In’ Crowd” — a 1964 jukebox hit famously covered, to even greater chart success, by Chicago’s own Ramsey Lewis. The Jazz Day version included Kris Bowers on piano, Christian McBride on bass and Bobby Broom on guitar, with a wailing baritone saxophone solo by James Carter.



Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz - Buddy Guy, performing "Damn Right, I've Got the Blues" with Béla Fleck at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, Lyric Opera of Chicago, April 30, 2026.

Kurt Elling — co-host of the concert, and co-chairman of the Chicago Jazz Alliance — took the stage to sing a nimble “Dat Dere,” paying tribute not only its Philly-born composer, Bobby Timmons, but also Chicago native Oscar Brown, Jr., who wrote the playfully paternal vocalese lyrics, and whose centennial falls later this year. (The punchy solos on the tune were by Dawkins and trumpeter Tiger Okoshi.)

Elling stayed on to acknowledge the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, whose intrepid ethos surely presented the highest degree of difficulty for any Jazz Day concert. Naming titans like Roscoe Mitchell and Henry Threadgill, Elling noted that they “built and have sustained a creative community with new platforms for experimentation, education, and excellence in Black music.” What ensued was a rollicking performance led by vocalist Dee Alexander. Her singsong refrain, “We’ve got it goin’ on,” was vibrantly manifested by the radiant playing of Dawkins, pianist Alexis Lombre, trumpeters Marquis Hill and Ben Lamar Gay, and tenor saxophonist Ed Wilkerson. It was a genuine highlight of the concert, as the crowd confirmed.



Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz - Lizz Wright performing "Seems I'm Never Tired Lovin' You" with Christian McBride, Terri Lyne Carrington and Uniting Voices at the International Jazz Day Global All-Star Concert, April 30, 2026.

Singers provided more of the evening's highlights, none higher than a magisterial gospel performance by Lizz Wright, finessing "Seems I'm Never Tired Lovin' You" with backing from Carrington, McBride, pianist Helen Sung, and the youth choir Uniting Voices Chicago. Close behind in the spine-tingling department was Dianne Reeves' regal saunter through "In Sentimental Mood," with a nimble bass solo by McBride.

Jacob Collier emerged just after a video homage to Quincy Jones, which provided a natural onramp for him. He fondly and credibly described Jones and Hancock as "my harmonic godfathers," before offering a signature voice-and-piano version of the Michael Jackson hit "She's Out of My Life." (His reharmonization was impressive as ever, though an attempt at his trademark "Audience Choir" never achieved liftoff.) Collier stayed at the piano for a romp through Jones' "Soul Bossa Nova," featuring a bravura solo by Australian trumpeter James Morrison.

The emerging Portuguese singer-songwriter Bia Ferreira provided a welcome infusion of global lyricism, cradling an acoustic guitar as she offered her own tune, "Antes de Ir." Among her backing musicians was drummer Antonio Sánchez, who stayed onstage for a number by Fleck: "Touch and Go," from their album *BEATrio*, with additional fireworks provided by Chicago's own Jahari Stampley, who won the most recent Herbie Hancock Institute International Piano Competition, in 2023.



Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz - Portuguese singer-songwriter Bia Ferreira performing at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert at Lyric Opera of Chicago, April 30, 2026.

Naturally, there were centennial nods to Miles Davis and John Coltrane — respectively: “Tutu,” featuring Marquis Hill on muted trumpet and the song’s composer, Marcus Miller, on electric bass; and George Gershwin’s “Summertime,” in the pulsating Coltrane Quartet arrangement, with Aldana in strong form on tenor saxophone and a rhythm section that included Emmet Cohen on piano and Joel Ross, a Chicago son, on vibraphone.

Among the concert’s many other delights — including a lively “Caravan” led by Cuban pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba; a discursive “Silly Rabbit” performed by Robert Glasper with his band; and a literal blessing from Pope Leo XIV, delivered with passionate feeling by Bridgewater — was one that exceeded expectations. This was the John Lennon anthem “Imagine,” a customary finale in every Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, since 2012. Hancock has made the song a calling card — his most recent album was *The Imagine Project*, which earned him two Grammy Awards in 2011 — and he introduced it with earnest feeling here. “It has been a lighthouse guiding us toward each other,” he said.



Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz - A host of singers, including Kurt Elling, Dianne Reeves and Gregory Porter, performing "Imagine" at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, April 30, 2026.

This could have felt rote and ceremonial, as it has in some previous Jazz Day concerts. But as Hancock played his watercolor chords and Elling opened with the song's second verse — the one hailing a world without borders, and “Nothing to kill or die for” — there was a dawning sense of higher purpose.

A beat kicked in, and the vocal baton was passed down: to Reeves, Collier, Ferreira and Wright. Then Guy chimed in on his electric guitar, soloing with a firm grasp of the song's form, before Bridgewater and Porter brought it home. In the euphoric scat coda that concluded the song, there was hope and maybe some healing, bolstered by the conviction that unity and harmony are more than just musical ideals.