

International Jazz Day in Australia: Continental Connections

On IJD 2019, Oz took center stage—and seemed like anything but a far-off land

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James Morrison (left) and William Barton at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, Melbourne, Australia, April 30, 2019 (photo: Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

T

he late Bernie McGann, a hugely influential figure in the history of Australian jazz,

studied and played in New York, collaborated with Freddie Hubbard, Sonny Stitt, Dave Liebman and others, and toured extensively. But he also enjoyed a life of solace in a small picturesque coastal town south of Sydney, working as a postman and practicing his saxophone in the meditative surroundings of the bush.

McGann's history can be taken as metaphor writ large: Artistic brilliance against gorgeous isolation seems an overarching theme of Australia's century-deep jazz heritage, which burgeoned through a dance- and swing-band craze, developed an enduring early-jazz tradition, and has branched out into all varieties of modernism. "We're on an island in the South Pacific," the trumpeter and multi-instrumentalist James Morrison pointed out to me late in the evening of Tuesday, April 30. Morrison is a jazz educator who runs a namesake academy, a facilitator for the music and jazz's premier public ambassador in Australia, with a profile like Wynton Marsalis' in the States or Igor Butman's in Russia.

The customary trajectory for gifted Australian musicians like Morrison or the trumpeter Mat Jodrell, who worked successfully on the New York scene for eight years before settling back in Melbourne, is one of a pilgrimage and a homecoming. Moving beyond the canon recordings and connecting to the music's landmarks and cultural roots becomes, to borrow Morrison's phrase, an "irresistible urge." Australia's diversity and opportunities are stalwart, but the continent will be always be some 10,000 miles away from the Village Vanguard. There's also the matter of simply seeing how you stack up. "I think you've got to have perspective," said Jodrell, whose excellent new album is called *Insurgent*. "You don't know until you know."

But "in a way," Morrison explained, "the very same thing that drives [Australian musicians] to leave drives them to come back—the connection. They need to bring that connection back here, the sounds they've learned."

"Not many Australians leave and don't come back, just because of how it is to live here," he added later. "There isn't anywhere else that's quite like this. I'm sure there are a lot of countries that say that, but for us it's special. They want to come back and make their music here."



Left to right: Lizz Wright, Joey DeFrancesco, Leonard Brown, and James Genus at the International Jazz Day All-Star Global Concert, Melbourne, Australia, April 30, 2019 (photo: Graham Denholm/Getty Images for Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

A couple of hours earlier, at Melbourne’s Hamer Hall, Australia had been the epicenter of the jazz universe without argument. At the All-Star Global Concert that acts as the focal point of International Jazz Day, now in its eighth year, a powerful multinational lineup filled out a flowing two-hour program. Morrison and IJD catalyst Herbie Hancock served as artistic co-directors, with musical direction by keyboardist John Beasley.

As in years past, the show deftly balanced vocal and instrumental pleasures, and tuned its lineup to embody the International Jazz Day mantra of jazz as a vehicle for the diplomacy that transcends politics. (Or, as Hancock put it in his onstage remarks: “April 30 is now recognized as a day when people of all ages, genders, and ethnicities come together and prove that our similarities are stronger than our differences.”) To open, Jane Monheit swung through “East of the Sun (and West of the Moon)” with Antonio Sánchez on drums, Ben Williams on bass, and three of Australia’s finest players—Jodrell, guitarist James Muller, and pianist Paul Grabowsky.

Using good humor and fantastic time feel, Kurt Elling navigated “Have You Called Her Today?” by employing the Mark Murphy school of jazz-cat virtuosity. With “Lady Revisited,” Somi

transported the Melbourne crowd to Lagos, and took a spiritually grooving stand against domestic abuse. Monheit and guitarist/singer Chico Pinheiro did their best Elis Regina and Tom Jobim on “Águas de Março”; earlier, Pinheiro had flexed his technical command on his “Boca de Siri,” blurring the lines between his singing and playing but leaving space for saxophonist Butman’s amped-up soloing. Taking her full-bodied timbre to Nina Simone’s “Seems I’m Never Tired Lovin’ You” and Thomas A. Dorsey’s “Singing in My Soul,” Lizz Wright proved an heiress to Aretha, Dianne Reeves, and other forebears on the axis of jazz and R&B. Ledisi used Otis Redding’s remodeling of “Try a Little Tenderness” to shatter the roof, before the regular IJD finale, John Lennon’s “Imagine,” offered an all-in feel-good coda.

Elsewhere, a potent trombone frontline of Morrison, Japan’s Eijiro Nakagawa, and England’s Mark Nightingale tackled “Bernie’s Tune” with more gusto than West Coast cool. Wayne Shorter’s “Beauty and the Beast” thankfully retained its world-funky midtempo gait, with Hancock occupying the piano chair he held on the *Native Dancer* LP and the Dutch saxophonist Tineke Postma deftly handling Shorter’s role. Hancock’s “One Finger Snap,” featuring organist Joey DeFrancesco, trumpeter Theo Croker, saxophonist Eli Degibri, and drummer Brian Blade, acted as a sturdy shout-out to jazz’s hard-swinging center of gravity. Later, Hancock nodded to the world-jazz arrangement of Peter Gabriel’s “Mercy Street” that highlights the pianist’s 1996 album, *The New Standard*.

Morrison introduced and helmed the most meaningful, on-message performance of the evening: the Persian line “Melody in Esfahan,” boasting the trumpeter, Muller, and didgeridoo player William Barton, from Australia; Williams, Blade, and saxophonist Antonio Hart, from the U.S.; India’s Aditya Kalyanpur on tabla; China’s A Bu on piano; and Iran’s Cieavash Arian on the *kamancheh*, a bowed string instrument. Its slinky contours gave way to swinging solos—Hart delightfully evoked Impulse! spiritual jazz—and progressed toward an urgent climax. As in Global Concerts past, many of the evening’s most exciting moments had to do with the details of personnel and musical direction. The band assembled behind Wright, for instance, could easily become part of R&B lore if it were a singer’s working group. DeFrancesco and pianist Eric Reed combined impeccably, despite the overabundance of harmony on tap; guitarist Jeff Parker summoned his inner B.B. King for stinging leads; and the rhythm tandem of Blade and bassist James Genus defined the concept of pocket. (Blade, a coup whenever and wherever he appears, was a pure joy to hear and see—an absolute master of dynamics and a source of irrepressible enthusiasm.)



Herbie Hancock (far right) leads a master class at the Sydney Opera House, April 25, 2019 (photo: Steve Munding/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

IJD kicked off in 2012 and has since become a source of pride for its co-organizers: UNESCO, for which Hancock serves as a Goodwill Ambassador, and the recently minted Herbie Hancock Institute for Jazz (which, given its leader's affable charisma with audiences and student musicians, comes off as more accurate than the Thelonious Monk Institute, the organization's longstanding previous name).

Each year a city is designated to host the Global Concert as well as the official educational outreach and panel sessions organized by the Hancock Institute. Melbourne broke a streak of relative political complexity that included concerts in Havana (in 2017) and Saint Petersburg (in 2018). It also proved an aberration in that it was one town in a network of cities, including Sydney, the initially mooted host. In Sydney, Hancock, Morrison, and the young musicians in the highly selective Hancock Institute Fellows program gave masterclasses at the iconic Opera House.

In one morning session there, Morrison explained base notions about jazz and improvisation to some very young students, with fatherly tact and savvy use of analogy. Another session held that afternoon commenced with a *Head Hunters*-inspired arrangement of "Watermelon Man," before the Fellows performed an entertaining program that covered 101-level jazz

history. When it came time for modal jazz, Hancock took to the piano and transformed the atmosphere. He ramped up “So What” to the gallop that Miles Davis preferred on the road, and pushed his rhythm mates, bassist Emma Dayhuff and drummer Malachi Whitson, further still. Quickly the ensemble was drawing upon elements of postbop and the avant-garde in quintessential Hancock style, with a sense of elasticity and fearlessness that had more to do with Wayne Shorter’s working quartet than with *Kind of Blue*. Another fun masterclass, held a few days later in Melbourne, saw the Fellows and Hancock use crowd participation to build a composition from the ground up, in about half an hour.

For his part, Morrison stressed inclusivity. On April 30, you could hear the “100 Bands” initiative in action throughout Melbourne’s streets, the result of a wide-open call for jazz (and jazz-ish) performers. Morrison also enacted a nationwide contest for schoolchildren, challenging them to write a melody that would serve as the theme for IJD 2019. Nine-year-old Naomi Nogawa-Lewy and 12-year-old Flynn Poppleton were chosen by Hancock via blind audition and named co-victors, and their work was performed by an orchestra of standout public-school musicians during a morning ceremony hosted by Victoria Governor Linda Dessau. The melodies, filtered through the ensemble, became impressive modern-mainstream big-band vernacular. And no wonder: Poppleton, in a brief interview, was precocity incarnate. Even before the contest, he’d enjoyed tooling around with new tunes in the composition software program Sibelius, and his favorite trumpeters include Miles, Louis, Freddie Hubbard, and Bobby Shew.

A shrewd jazz-education machine has been at work in Australia, and student musicians of varying ages bore its lessons well. Players like Poppleton’s older brother, alto saxophonist Damon, had clearly internalized bebop language. “The vibe I got seemed to be that there is a strong appreciation for the tradition,” said the harmonica virtuoso and Hancock Fellow Roni Eytan, who was born in Jerusalem. “They love the music, they study, they check out the different recordings, they check out the masters. It reminded me a bit of Israel, because in Israel there’s also a strong emphasis to study the jazz tradition, and to come from that to find yourself.”



Antonio Hart leads a big band workshop at the Sydney Opera House, April 26, 2019 (photo: Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

The scenes in Sydney and Melbourne spill over with musicians who've found themselves, working in charmed environs. To a New Yorker, that means cosmopolitanism without the stifling population density, and a general warmth and friendliness that can seem surreal in its constancy.

The clubs exhibit this generosity in spades. Australia has a reputation for being expensive, but its notions of jazz clubgoing are refreshingly modest. Cover charges hover between \$10 and \$20, drink prices are on par with those of any major American city, and bar service is preferred to wait service, giving the culture a casual, coffeehouse air. The music, helpfully, is not laissez-faire in its quality. Rather, it's either expertly played, conceptually engaging, or most often both.

At Foundry 616 in Sydney, a city where some [controversial legislation](#) has taken its toll on the scene, the drummer Andrew Dickeson paid tribute to Art Blakey with period detail. At Sydney's Venue 505, Mike Nock, a legendary figure known for exploring the through line between bop, early fusion, and the avant-garde, took the melodic approach to free improvisation you might associate with Keith Jarrett or Jim Hall. Next up that night was HEKKA, a contemporary piano trio descended from the postmodernism of the Bad Plus. In Melbourne, Paul Williamson, a

fantastic tenorman with a robust, vibrato-soaked sound, held court at the comfy Uptown Jazz Cafe. The following evening, at the Jazzlab, the wonderful pianist/composer Andrea Keller led a quintet that educed many influences—ECM, new music, postbop, avant-rock—but carved out its own supremely listenable niche. And that’s to say nothing of [the music](#) bought or browsed at outstanding, jazz-rich record shops like Birdland in Sydney and Northside Records in Melbourne. (Brick-and-mortar retail seems healthier here than in the States, and the snobbish record-shop clerk isn’t an Australian species.) To discover Australian jazz is to become enamored of it.

Perhaps the grandest discovery was the Australian Aboriginal didgeridoo player William Barton, who has applied his mastery of a continental tradition to orchestral music, jazz, and contemporary styles. (He can beatbox on his ax.) He twice collaborated in duo with Morrison, first at a Melbourne masterclass and then to open the All-Star Global Concert, and both performances essentially stole the weeklong program. The contrast of Barton’s palpitating low end and Morrison’s high-note wizardry, and the rhythmically dynamic dialogue that followed, enraptured the room in ways I’ve rarely witnessed. The performances also embodied the IJD ethos of cross-cultural exchange with so much directness it seems inaccurate to use the word “metaphor.” But there was another level of universality on hand, one that moved beyond jazz to include ideas of communion and lineage inherent in all music, all sound. “Every sound means something,” Barton told me later. “I always acknowledge my ancestors and my teachers before me, for what they have given me.

“You’re constantly reminding yourself, ‘I’m here because my uncle taught me many years ago.’ So when you’re out there onstage, you’re telling your story. As a musician, I’m there for a cause. I’m there to speak the truth.”

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