

The 2017 International Jazz Day Global Concert

Art, people before politics at this all-star show in Havana, Cuba

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By Evan Haga

Despite taking place in Havana, Cuba, one of the most inspiring but politically complex nations on the planet, this year's International Jazz Day Global Concert, which streamed live from the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso on Sunday, didn't dig into specifics regarding any of the world's governments or regimes. The two-and-a-half-hour all-star concert, presented in English and Spanish and hosted by Will Smith, with show-stealing assistance from bassist-vocalist Esperanza Spalding, stayed on message, again and again: International Jazz Day promotes the music as a language, a facilitator for meaningful, joyful democratic interaction between disparate peoples.



Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, which organizes the event alongside the Thelonious Monk Institute, spoke briefly and broadly but with spiritual pertinence. She reminded the house that jazz has been “the soundtrack for struggles all over the world,” and praised the 2017 host nation as “a country that understands the importance of music, with a society that grasps so intimately the power of culture to change lives.”

“[We celebrate jazz] because culture and human rights go hand in hand, and those who seek to divide, fragment or weaken humanity will always target culture and seek to control diversity,” she continued. “This is why we must stand together, speak out together, listen together [and play jazz] together—to highlight and share the power of culture, knowledge, ideas...” These are of course political sentiments, but they’re also concepts of inclusion that should be inarguable: people, expression, hope for change and peace. Notice how names were evoked but not named.



Cuba seized the opportunity to showcase its talent, which gave this sixth annual program a stronger, more memorable aesthetic; not surprisingly, the more Afro-Cuban the evening became, the more sparks flew. At its best, Afro-Cuban music is inherently devotional, conjuring a trancelike atmosphere and piling on the intensity toward a grand moment of catharsis; even within the restraints of a broadcast, this concert delivered several of those enthralling rumba-descended moments. Singer-percussionist (and Irakere co-founder) Oscar Valdés centered an explosive opening take of “Manteca,” underscored by a trumpet showdown between Germany’s Till Brönner, Japan’s Takuya Kuroda and Cuba’s Julio Padrón. Francisco “Pancho” Amat, with fantastic help from singer and *oud* player Dhafer Youssef and violinist William Roblejo, gave a clinic in *tres* technique during a rousing exhibition of *changüí*, a traditional Cuban style rooted in Guantánamo.

Spalding and Bobby Carcassés formed a delightfully rhythmic and charismatic vocal frontline on her “I Adore You.” (Equally mighty was the hookup between Mexican-born drummer Antonio Sanchez and veteran Cuban bassist Jorge Reyes.) An all-star Cuban large ensemble performed matchless, solo-heavy Afro-Cuban jazz, with flutist Orlando “Maraca” Valle and singer Sixto “El Indio” Llorente bringing the pot from strong simmer to boil through *son* spirit. The traditional IJD concert finale, a full-cast arrangement of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” picked up Afro-Cuban steam midway through and morphed into a crowd-fueled singalong of “Guantanamera.”

Other high points summoned up the crack musical direction of IJDs past, handled this year by John Beasley and Emilio Vega, with a lineup that reflected the guidance of the Monk Institute, the global philosophy and Herbie Hancock, the concert's co-artistic director with Chucho Valdés. (Within the Cuban cast was, expectedly, a strong showing of Valdés collaborators.) Sidestepping his more overtly Afro-Cuban history, Hancock offered "4 A.M." with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, saxophonist Kenny Garrett, drummer Sanchez and bassist Marcus Miller, whose buoyant slapping and popping presented a rightful alternative to Jaco Pastorius' sleek grooving on the tune's original 1980 recording. Good ol' burning American postbop was represented via Freddie Hubbard's "Byrd Like," torn up by pianist Christian Sands, trumpeter Padrón, bassist Ben Williams, saxophonists Antonio Hart and Igor Butman, trombonist Gianluca Petrella and drummer Carl Allen. Kurt Elling charmed on "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York," complemented by Melissa Aldana's consummate tenor work. Cassandra Wilson tackled her "You Move Me," with appropriately subtle, emotive accents from Cuban pianist Harold López-Nussa and French guitarist Marc Antoine. Brazilian keyboardist, singer and composer Ivan Lins, aided by the Chinese-born, New York-based piano prodigy A Bu, played ambassador for the Brazilian end of Latin jazz with his "Lua Soberana."



Korean singer Youn Sun Nah, a multilingual, tradition-spanning stylist who seems tailor-made for the IJD ethos, interpreted "Bésame Mucho" in a way that pointed up the totality of her abilities: the crystalline timbre and intonation of her instrument; her absolute precision in phrasing; a palpable sense of melancholy, bolstered here by the brilliant violinist Regina Carter. Cameroonian bassist and vocalist Richard Bona, another globally formed megatalent who personifies the event's message, sang the Cuban standard "Bilongo" in Wolof, propelled by a band including pianist Robert Fonseca, percussionists Adel González and Yaroldi Abreu, and Barbarito Torres, the *laúd* player and Buena Vista Social Club alum. (The homegrown percussion sections were a not-so-secret weapon throughout the evening.)

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Source: JazzTimes

Two of Cuba's most widely renowned musicians, pianists Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba, acknowledged Monk's centennial through a "Blue Monk" that overflowed with barrelhouse feeling and soulful tweaks to the composer's sly harmonic and melodic contours. Two-piano situations, and the conservatory-driven Cuban jazz-piano tradition in general, can easily become overstuffed. But this union was masterfully lyrical and empathetic, and gave more proof of jazz's profound cross-cultural heritage. It held up IJD's m.o., no teleprompter required.

For more on the IJD Global Concert, the related activities in Cuba and the Cuban music scene, look out for *JazzTimes*' July/August issue.



