

In Melbourne and Sydney, International Jazz Day Explores Cultural Exchange

[LIVE, NEWS, LIZZ WRIGHT, IGOR BUTMAN, HERBIE HANCOCK](#)

By [John Murph](#) | May. 2, 2019



James Morrison (left) and William Barton perform April 30 at Arts Centre Melbourne's Hamer Hall in Australia. (Photo: Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

Acknowledgments of Australia's indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were peppered throughout the 2019 International Jazz Day celebrations in the host cities of Melbourne and Sydney during late April.

Before beginning several educational workshops and cultural tours, Australian spokespersons—regardless of ethnicity—gave voice to specific indigenous nations, sometimes alluding to the country's original sin: the Dutch,

Spanish and British invasion and establishment of Australia as a penal colony in 1788, which led to the deaths, displacement and marginalization of indigenous people who had occupied the land well before their arrival.

After the April 30 main concert inside Arts Centre Melbourne's Hamer Hall, William Barton, a didgeridoo virtuoso of the Kalkadunga nation and one of several esteemed Australian musicians featured on stage, contextualized the acknowledgements beyond IJD festivities. "[The acknowledgements] are becoming more mainstream in Australian culture," he explained. "[It] lays a new foundation for our identity. Our identity is our most important thing; it's what keeps our people and cultures alive."

Much of these newfound official statements honoring Australia's indigenous people were spurred by the 2001 establishment of Reconciliation Australia, a nongovernmental organization aimed at promoting unity among the country's indigenous and nonindigenous communities. During the concert, Barton acknowledged his Aboriginal heritage and reconciliation with Australia's citizens of European descent through music when he commenced the evening with a duet alongside trumpeter and trombonist James Morrison, the concert co-artistic director. As if they were summoning ancestral spirits, Barton crafted slow rhythmic pulses, hypnotic drones and evocative swooshes interspersed with Morrison's equally coruscating passages.

Barton said he prized those types of musical collaborations because they enable him to extend the didgeridoo's legacy beyond its ceremonial and storytelling provenance: "The music flowed from our own interests and own honest truths as musicians, what was passed onto us from [our respective] Aboriginal and jazz traditions, and what we learn after collaborating with other artists."

The two put their ideals of reconciliation in a grander context when playing "Melody In Esfahan," an elaborate Morrison composition that showcased a nonet that resembled a makeshift United Nations. In addition to Morrison and Barton, the ensemble featured fellow Australian guitarist James Muller, Iranian comanche player Cieavash Arian, Chinese pianist A Bu, Indian tabla player Aditya Kalyanpur and, from the United States, bassist Ben Williams, drummer Brian Blade and alto saxophonist Antonio Hart. Together, the ensemble delivered an enticing Persian-inspired melody, driven by a polyrhythmic groove; the musical tapestry was the evening's most gratifying instrumental performance.



After the concert, Morrison mentioned that because Australia is in the South Pacific, far removed from many other countries, he wanted a composition that illustrated how the country still can connect with other nations. Of course, those multicultural musical collaborations long have been the philosophical anchor for IJD since its 2011 launch by UNESCO and the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz (formerly the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz). In addition to the global lineup on “Melody In Esfahan,” other musicians at the 2019 main concert represented Japan, Russia, Brazil, Lebanon, Israel, Mexico, England and the Netherlands.

Hancock, UNESCO goodwill ambassador and IJD co-artistic director, proclaimed jazz “the universal language of peace,” while conveying the genre’s global appeal and reminding the audience that 195 countries around the world participated in the event. He also made sure to mention that Melbourne was one of the first cities to welcome International Jazz Day into the world.

“For eight years, April 30 is now recognized as a day for people of all ages, genders and ethnicities to come together and prove that our similarities are stronger than our differences,” he enthused.

Repertoire-wise, the music performed during the main concert usually allots a significant amount of space to musicians paying tribute to jazz elders. Under the musical direction of pianist John Beasley, this year’s program swung in agreeable, standard-heavy fashion. Commendable renditions of Brooks Bowman’s “East Of The Sun (And West Of The Moon),” led by singer Jane Monheit; Ben Webster’s “Did You Call Her Today,” led by vocalist Kurt Elling; and Gerry Mulligan’s “Bernie’s Tune,” featuring dazzling trombone work from Morrison, bounced among Brazilian jazz gems.

Unsurprisingly, works from Hancock’s songbook sprang forth, too: a spirited reading of his 1960s post-bop classic “One Finger Snap,” featuring organist Joey DeFrancesco instead of piano, as well as his sublime mid-1990s arrangement of Peter Gabriel’s “Mercy Street,” which showcased Hancock’s ingenious piano playing.

Yet, it was singers Somi and Lizz Wright who truly elevated the concert, perhaps due to their sets comprising work from more recent albums. Somi channeled much of Miriam Makeba’s majestic electricity on the Nigerian groove-influenced “Lady Revisited,” an original from her 2014 album, *The Lagos Music Salon*. And Wright exhibited Southern gospel roots and passionate blues-soaked sensuality on her mesmerizing makeovers of Nina Simone’s “Seems Like I’m Never Tired Lovin’ You” and Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s “Singing In My Soul,” both from her 2017 album, *Grace*.

The concert’s overall feel-good vibe—including its closing, near-all-hands-on-deck reading of John Lennon’s “Imagine”—epitomized much of the welcoming hospitality that permeated Sydney and Melbourne, particularly the latter’s vibrant underground music scene. **DB**