

Prominent jazz celebrations are a beautiful thing

By Jon W. Poses

[Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series on Jazz Appreciation Month. Part One ran April 4.]

Writing in this space January 24, I suggested Doug Emhoff, “The Second Gentleman,” surely must be a jazz fan. After all, he and his first wife, Kerstin Emhoff, named their son Cole after John Coltrane and their daughter Ella after Ella Fitzgerald.

I proposed that, all things being equal, there might be a good chance jazz would return to the White House, having a presence during the Obama Administration before completely disappearing during the following one.

Lo and behold, less than three months later, it seems such a development has come to fruition. Emhoff will “provide opening remarks” as part of the upcoming NEA Jazz Masters Tribute Concert, according to a National Endowment for the Arts press release.

The concert takes place Thursday, April 22 at 7 p.m. Missouri time in San Francisco, and will air virtually on multiple websites including the NEA's own arts.gov, where it will also be archived for future viewing.

For those of us who appreciate when jazz enjoys enhanced visibility, having Emhoff involved — even if it will likely be briefly — with the prestigious annual NEA Jazz Masters presentation should be taken as a positive. His participation bodes well for the White House, on some level, to be involved in future jazz-related activities.

Irrespective of White House involvement, the NEA Jazz Masters evening remains among the more enjoyable industry gatherings — except during a pandemic, of course. For those who are recognized, it is tantamount to a lifetime achievement award, one offered solely to living practitioners. Thus, even the likes of iconic figures such as Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, and other true jazz giants who died before the program's 1982 start, are not recipients of the prestigious award.

Selective from the start, only a scant 161 people — mostly musicians, with some advocates included — have received the call and the accompanying \$25,000 award.

For many years, the celebration was less public. Recently the NEA has attempted to draw increased attention to the event, hosting it in New York and producing it in collaboration with the higher profile Jazz at Lincoln Center complex. For the past few years, the event has moved across the country and is now produced in collaboration with SFJazz, the Bay Area's answer to JALC.

The NEA, as a government-funded agency, is required to make the event — live or virtual — free to all. Ordinarily, the limit of two tickets per person, put "on sale" online, are rapidly snatched up. I have been fortunate to attend on numerous occasions.

As was the case a year ago, there will be no in-person attendance on Thursday beyond those directly involved. The evening offers a recognition of the recipients, with someone close to them speaking about their contribution to jazz and a short accompanying biographical video. In between are musical selections performed by the just-named, previously-honored NEA Jazz Masters and other special guests.

This year's participant list impresses. The four 2021 recipients feature three musicians and a "jazz advocate." Drummer/ percussionist/bandleader Terri Lyne Carrington, drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath and multi-instrumentalist Henry Threadgill will be inducted along with Phil Schaap, the long-time on-air announcer and jazz historian.

Vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, a 2017 NEA Jazz Master recipient, and actor Delroy Lindo serve as co-hosts with acclaimed saxophonist Miguel Zenón set as musical director. Among the musical guests: NEA Jazz Masters Wynton and Jason Marsalis and Dianne Reeves as well as Obed Calvaire, Avishai Cohen, Joe Lovano, Pedrito Martinez, Linda May Han Oh, Danilo Pérez, Lizz Wright, and the SFJAZZ High School All Stars.

The event also includes video testimonials from NEA Jazz Masters Herbie Hancock, Charles Lloyd and Wayne Shorter, among others.

From America to the world

International Jazz Day marks the unofficial culmination of Jazz Appreciation Month. Though not joined officially, the two are inextricably tied together. How could they not be? It was 10 years ago that the UNESCO General Conference proclaimed April 30 International Jazz Day.

Given the contentious state of our country — and seemingly everywhere else on the planet — having 190 countries, representing every continent, recognize "America's Gift To The World" is something to celebrate.

UNESCO's statement in part intimates that jazz's power is a force for peace, dialogue and mutual understanding. You really can't argue with that sentiment.

While the overarching vibe might seem saccharine to some, to those involved with jazz, the point of International Jazz Day — to "raise awareness of the virtues of jazz as an educational tool, and a force for empathy, dialogue and enhanced cooperation among people" — arrives unpretentiously.

UNESCO's proclamation goes on to say: "Many involved in jazz embrace the opportunity to foster greater appreciation not only for the music but also for the contribution it can make to building more inclusive societies."

UNESCO has made its International Jazz Day website interactive in several ways. The most obvious is encouraging people from all over the world to list the April 30 events taking place in their communities.

As organizations add events, doing so with more frequency as the 30th approaches, the global map populates with participants appearing in every country. Visitors can then expand the map in any direction to concentrate on a single continent or country, thus creating distance between the multitude of individual overlapping geographic markers; people can zoom in and learn in detail what each organization has scheduled.

Whether it's a fact or a figment of one's imagination, the map's density makes it feel as if jazz — at least for one day — is quite literally going on everywhere. And that is a beautiful thing.

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