

International Jazz Day shines in İstanbul

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International Jazz Day took İstanbul by storm on April 30. Thanks to İKSV (İstanbul Foundation for Art and Culture), Garanti Bank, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the Thelonius Monk Foundation and the Turkish Ministry of Culture, İstanbul was a swingin' city.

April 30 was all about jazz, and jazz was celebrated around the world for 24 consecutive hours. The day is the brainchild of pianist/composer Herbie Hancock, the Goodwill Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue to UNESCO. He proudly announced in a press conference here this week: "Last year, on our first International Jazz Day, we reached 1 billion people. Let me say that again -- 1 billion people! This year, 168 nations around the world are coming together in the name of jazz." And İstanbul was named the hub city for 2013's global Jazz Day celebration.

But what exactly is jazz? It's a musical term from the early 20th century in America that now has several definitions, but its fundamental meaning is simply "improvised music." Its roots are "the blues," a music form which emerged out of the singing of African slaves working in the cotton fields in the southern United States.

The blues spawned many variations, including rock 'n' roll and R&B (rhythm and blues), but the classic format of jazz uses what is known as the American Songbook of "standards" that every jazz musician and singer learns. Jazz is a distinctly American art form that has been played in almost every country in the world for decades.

The Jazz Day schedule in İstanbul was a rich array of activities that included concerts, lectures, a photo exhibit, workshops, films, roundtable discussions, a painting exhibit and a talk by the son of Thelonius Monk, who is continuing his famous father's musical leadership via his eponymous global institute.

Of the 18 main events and eight fringe events planned, I managed to attend seven. I began with an exhibit and lecture at Borusan Music House, where there was "Jam Session," a collection of historic photographs of legendary jazz stars like Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong as they toured the world, bringing their music outside the US for the first time. Curator Curtis Sandberg of the Meridian International Center in Washington, D.C., energetically revealed historical details and behind-the-scenes stories of the 1950s and 60s.

I continued to a student concert at Bahçeşehir University hosted by New York jazz professors, singer Amy London and guitarist Roni Ben-Hur. Then I attended a master class at Borusan Music House given by a cadre of young musicians who are scholarship students at the Los Angeles branch of the Thelonius Monk Institute. Led by Daniel Seeff, the group of six instrumentalists played an original piece by their pianist, Miro Sprague, and then engaged in what they call "peer-to-peer" education. They invited students from Yıldız Technical University's conservatory and Bahçeşehir University's Jazz Certificate Program to perform and accept instruction from the Monk Institute's musicians. Especially illuminating was adjunct singer Lisa Henry's brilliant and encouraging examples for understanding the blues, how to scat (improvise with the voice) and how to make a proper ending to a song.

At the gallery SALT Beyoğlu, four films were screened from morning 'til night. I caught two: the debut of Batu Akyol's 30-minute work-in-progress, "Jazz in Turkey," and Susan Steinberg's 2007 documentary about music producer Ahmet Ertegün, "Atlantic Records: The House That Ahmet Built." The former showed many interviews with Turkish and American jazz scholars, professors and artists talking about the roots of jazz in Turkey, which revealed, interestingly, Armenian in addition to American origins. The latter was an affectionate bio-pic that gave an exceptionally detailed story of Ertegün's life and career trajectory. As a fearless champion of the music of black Americans during dark decades of racism and segregation, Ertegün was heroic and exemplary.

Next on my itinerary was percussionist Okay Temiz's outdoor drum-fest at the Beyoğlu Municipality's Youth Center in Galata, with 25 children and Senegalese drummer Alassane Diop. All kinds of skin drums, tambourines, maracas and Temiz's hand-made instruments produced a tantalizing, pulsating sound that drew in the neighbors and tourists.

In the evening, a gala concert was held in Hagia Irene on the Topkapı Palace grounds with an all-star cast. Thirty-six performers, including such established names as Al Jarreau, Marcus Miller, Ramsey Lewis, Milton Nascimento, Eddie Palmieri, Diane Reeves, John MacLaughlin and Branford Marsalis, joined newcomers Joss Stone, Keiko Matsui, James Genus, Robert Glasper, and singer/bassist Esperanza Spalding -- the 2013 Grammy winner for best jazz vocalist and

arranger. Herbie Hancock served as master of ceremonies, and guests at the speakers' microphone included the Turkish Minister of Culture Ömer Çelik, comedian Cem Yılmaz and UNESCO's Director General Irina Bokova.

Though the musicians were the world's best and brightest in the jazz field and the music made that night was memorably stunning, the event was by invitation only and not available to the ticket-buying public. Evidently the government wanted to contain the performance in an indoor venue that could be heavily secured and only allow in a selected list of attendees. For those who couldn't get an invitation, the concert was broadcast on the internet and live-streamed to certain locations in İstanbul.

This exclusivity seems contrary to the very essence of jazz and its populist roots. Jazz was the music of dirt-poor, persecuted people, and is fundamentally inclusive in origin and in practice. To make jazz available to everyone in a way that is congruent to this music's humble beginnings and now as a tool of cultural diplomacy, it would have been better served in an outdoor amphitheater to accommodate thousands, instead of a comparatively small inner circle.