

UN celebrates International Jazz Day

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The audience for the inaugural concert of International Jazz Day at the United Nations on Monday was kissed, time and time again, by moments of sheer musical bliss.

There was a headspinning roster of talent inside the U.N. General Assembly Hall — and an A-list of celebrity hosts, including Morgan Freeman, Michael Douglas, Robert De Niro and Quincy Jones.

Compositions by George Gershwin, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Duke Ellington, among others, became democratic platforms for fluid ensemble cooperation and heartfelt individual expression.

Tony Bennett's rendition of Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars" was musical story-telling at its best.

Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette and Wayne Shorter (all Miles Davis alumni) elaborated the tension and release of Davis' "Milestones."

After Freeman described the blues as "the emotional and spiritual touchstone of jazz musicians around the world," musical director George Duke was joined by guitarist Derek Trucks, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, and guitar-playing vocalists Robert Cray and Susan Tedeschi to blow the blues away on Howlin' Wolf's "How Many More Years."

Flaunting her close familiarity with jazz styling, a svelte, sexy Chaka Khan sang a swingin' version of "Them There Eyes," with tenor sax man Joe Lovano uncoiling a solo, in honor of Ella Fitzgerald.

Jazz embracing peoples and musical forms around the world was a major theme.

African roots were honored via Angeliqe Kidjo and Lionel Loueke (both from Benin), Richard Bona (Cameroon), and the South African jazz icon Hugh Masekela. He was joined by Stevie Wonder on harmonica and elder statesman saxophonist Jimmy Heath on Masakela's 1968 hit, "Grazing in the Grass."

Sheila E. and Candido, 91, lit up the hall with lilting Latin jazz in a group led by drummer Bobby Sanabria. A duo of Hancock and Chinese concert pianist Lang Lang performing "Tonight" from "West Side Story" brought a breathtaking hush to the great hall.

Japanese piano wonder Hiromi Uehara, joined by trumpeter Terence Blanchard and Israeli saxophonist Eli Degibri, began the folk song "Sakura, Sakura" with a gentle touch that blossomed into two-handed fury.

East Indian tabla master Zakir Hussain leavened several songs, taking a thrilling solo on "Cottontail" after Dee Dee Bridgewater and Shankar Mahadevan — scatting over fast changes in an Indian vocal style — traded choruses.