



Features, Festival

## Istanbul Jazz Festival 2018: A Bridge Between East and West

2 WEEKS AGO by MATT MICUCCI

Jazz entered Turkey as early as the 1920s, and the term itself is integrated into the Turkish language. Even Turkish people unfamiliar with the music are familiar with the word. The common saying "caz yapmak" has two different meanings: one is "to make jazz," the other is "to yammer" or "to squawk."

There are other factors that link the jazz tradition to Turkish culture. For instance, it is generally accepted that the two basic elements of jazz are swing and improvisation. Turkish traditional music also swings in its own characteristic way and is equally driven by improvisation. In the past, the Istanbul Jazz Festival too has played with this peculiar connection. In 2013, American vocalist Dianne Reeves performed a fondly remembered concert with Turkish clarinetist Hüsni Şenlendirici, who is a prominent and internationally acclaimed artist and ambassador for Turkish traditional music.

Zakir Hussain, Dave Holland, Chris Potter at the Istanbul Jazz Festival 2018. (Photo by: Fatih Kucuk)

Thus the Istanbul Jazz Festival, which celebrated its landmark 25th anniversary this year, has always reveled in providing a space for the meeting of cultures via the language of music. The city of Istanbul itself is the ideal setting for such a meeting: an enormous transcontinental metropolis on the border between Europe and Asia, inhabited by well over 15 million people. It straddles the Bosphorus Strait that separates the two continents between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, and is therefore commonly viewed as a bridge between the Eastern and Western worlds.

This year's festival was no exception. As such, one of the most representative concerts from its program was that of the Cross Currents Trio, with British bassist Dave Holland, American saxophonist Chris Potter and Indian tabla master Zakir Hussain. They mesmerized the audience in attendance at the packed main theater of the Zorlu Performing Arts Center – the third largest performing arts venue in the world – playing hypnotic jazz with a Hindustani twist. This was also a special event because it was one of the first live performances by the trio.

The Istanbul Jazz Festival is one of two major music festivals organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), a non-profit and non-governmental cultural institution established in 1973 with the aim to enrich Istanbul's cultural and artistic life. The Istanbul Music Festival, which ran this year from May 23 to June 12, focused on classical music, while the jazz festival, which ran from June 26 to July 17, presented jazz music as well as other genres that originate and feed from jazz.

Much like other major jazz festivals from different parts of the world, the Istanbul Jazz Festival showcases jazz but also rock, folk and other music that reflects the times. Headliners this year included vocalists Melody Gardot and Robert Glasper's new supergroup R+R=NOW, but also vocalist Robert Plant and Nick Cave & The Bad seeds, among many others.

Fabrizio Bosso Quartet's concert at the garden of the Palazzo di Venezia at the Istanbul Jazz Festival 2018. (Photo by: Ilgin Eraslan Yanmaz)

Just as important to the structure of the festival as the lineup itself is the work of curation, such as that of matching the right venue to the right performers and concerts. For example, Italian trumpeter Fabrizio Bosso and his quartet played a concert in the garden of beautiful Venetian palazzo, and the festival brought free jazz concerts to the outdoors in a two-day event program titled "Jazz in the Parks."

For the second year in a row, the Istanbul Jazz Festival organized the "Vitrin: Showcase for Contemporary Music from Turkey." The showcase fulfills the festival's mission to provide a platform and an international collaborative environment for established and emerging musicians from Turkey, and invites an international delegation of industry professionals and journalists – including JAZZIZ.

Two "Vitrin" jazz artists particularly stood out. One was **pianist, composer, arranger and producer Çağrı Sertel**, performing his energetic jazz fusion influenced by elements of modern and progressive styles, and songs from his latest album, 2017's *Instant*. Sertel was the second performer of the "Vitrin" lineup and his concert took place in the IKSŞ Salon, located in the historic area of Galata, which carries the name of its past as a colony of the Republic of Genoa between 1272 and 1453, and whose skyline is dominated by the striking stone-capped Galata Tower.

Another highlight of the "Vitrin" program was pianist, vocalist and composer Selen Gülün, one of the most accomplished contemporary Turkish musicians, performing music from her "Kadınlar Matinesi" project, which translates as "Women's Matinee" and showcases works composed by her and other Turkish female musicians. She played a varied yet compact set of vocal jazz tunes with influences ranging from pop to bossa nova to calypso. Some of the songs, also included in a 2017 album of the same name, are instantly memorable, such as the joyous "Sem ve Ben" and the more cerebral and sophisticated "Neden?"

Selin Gülün performed "Kadınlar Matinesi" at the Istanbul Jazz Festival 2018. (Photo by: Zeynep Dogan)

One of the most important events of the "Vitrin" showcase, the "Night Out," was an intense program of 22 performances taking place in nine different venues of Kadıköy in the course of one night. Kadıköy is one of Istanbul's cultural hotspots, defined by its wealth of street art, theaters, cinemas, bookstores, bars, restaurants and the faint sound of the calm waters of the Sea of Marmara in the distance. On this night, for example, one could walk out of a concert by funk-influenced indie-rock band Dolu Kadehi Ters Tut and into a concert by Taner Öngür, a well-known figure of Anatolian pop, re-interpreting long-forgotten Istanbul folk ditties with his swinging guitar. One might also have witnessed a riveting experimentation of music and visual art by Cevdet Erek, bringing an idiosyncratic style of drumming and a conceptual sense of music treading the waters of rhythm, measure and silence, or opted instead for the warmth of interpretations of familiar American jazz standards elsewhere...

In addition to the more than 30 performances by some of the most prominent artists from the local scene in Turkey, "Vitrin" also featured performances by two acts from Azerbaijan. This represented one step towards the festival's aim of transforming "Vitrin" into a regional event. In conversation, the Assistant Director of the Jazz Festival Harun Izer, soon to officially take over as Festival Director following the departure of Pelin Opcin for London as head of Serious, producer of the London Jazz Fest, revealed: "In the future, I feel we should be focusing on more projects coming from Turkey and maybe even go a step further to help Turkish artists be known internationally. Along with international artists, the Istanbul Jazz Festival should be presenting the best example of Turkish jazz and contemporary music and help them grow."

*Like this article? Get more when you [subscribe](#).*

**TAGS: ISTANBUL JAZZ FESTIVAL**

