

Soul Freedom

Jazz, Life & Buddhism

Resonant Encounters

The following is installment two in “Jazz and Black Culture,” chapter one of SGI President Ikeda’s dialogue with jazz legends Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter titled “Soul Freedom: Jazz, Life and Buddhism.” The original text appears in the Sept. 18 edition of the Seikyo Shimbun, the Soka Gakkai’s daily newspaper.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda: Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, I am very pleased to see that the members of the youth division have achieved superb growth and development in their lives, following your examples. This has been reflected in the youth division’s culture festivals held throughout the U.S., which have all been great successes. As I recall, I first met you, Herbie, at the culture festival held in San Diego.

Herbie Hancock: Yes. It was a beautiful spring day in April 1974, just before I turned 34 years old. After our meeting, Sensei, you bid me farewell with the kind words, “Let’s meet again.”

President Ikeda: I remember that. I also recall that you were a young man with clear, hopeful eyes. That summer, we had an opportunity to meet again and had a leisurely talk in Tokyo.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. It was July 1974 when my band, The Headhunters, visited Japan. You invited us to a Japanese restaurant near the Soka Gakkai Headquarters. Everyone in our group was excited and perhaps a little tense about our meeting with you. We were anticipating a somewhat formal and stiff occasion. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that you showed not even the slightest hint of formality or stiffness.

President Ikeda: I am what is called an *Edokko*, a native son of Edo, that is, a true Tokyoite, and we characteristically have an intense aversion to stiff and formal situations. There is a Buddhist doctrine to describe an important characteristic of a true Buddha: “originally inherent and not created” (see *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. I, p. 427). In other words, people should be themselves and let their true selves shine. I also fondly recall meeting your band members and their families again, and catching up after our meeting three months before.

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Mr. Hancock: Sensei, we remember how kind and considerate you were to all of us. You welcomed us warmly and took great care to ensure that each one of us enjoyed ourselves. Then, sometime during the evening, we realized that you had donned an apron and were on the other side of the counter. We were quite surprised! You took it upon yourself to prepare some dishes for us to eat. We were just struck by how warm and compassionate you were.

President Ikeda: I am surprised you remember the occasion that well. We are all friends. We are family. And we all have a venerable Buddha nature. I recognize the major effort required to come to Japan all the way from a foreign country, so I always have the sense that an encounter maybe a once-in-a-lifetime experience. A passage from the Lotus Sutra addresses this issue of honoring a guest and advises that “you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha” (*The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, p. 365). Nichiren taught that in this passage, “Shakyamuni Buddha revealed the foremost point he wished to convey to us” (*The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, p. 192).

Mr. Hancock: Even though you were undoubtedly tired, Sensei, you even went so far as to compose a special message for me. It is one of my most valuable treasures. It reads: “To Herbie Hancock, my brother and friend, and friend of all the world’s people. I pray that you will achieve preeminence in the world of jazz and that you will be victorious in every way throughout your entire life.” When I read the message, it took my breath away, and I felt as if my heart were gripped by a powerful force.

President Ikeda: I was also struck deeply. I felt your music - a music of promise and hope for the future - ringing vibrantly in my heart. In the Lotus Sutra, it is written that wherever the Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound went and whichever way he turned, "The instruments of hundreds and thousands of heavenly musicians sounded of themselves without having been struck" (LSOC, 334). I must say that my conversation with the two of you strikes a resonant chord in my heart, as though it is an enchanting melody that lingers in my mind. I also have lasting memories of our meeting, Wayne, in April 1974.

Wayne Shorter: Yes. We met on the UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] campus when you came to give the lecture "Toward the Twenty-first Century." Immediately after your talk, you were making your way through the crowd. We were waiting outside and, as you approached, a friend of mine, and my wife, Ana Maria, who has since passed away, pushed me toward you.

President Ikeda: Yes. That's right. The memory of Ana Maria is also engraved in my heart. She was a refined and exceptionally intelligent woman, and a wonderful wife and mother. Her image is forever engraved in my and my wife's heart. I am sure that Ana Maria would have been happy about our conversations. Both my wife and I have prayed once again for her peaceful repose on this occasion.

Mr. Shorter: Thank you very much. I will never, ever forget that when my wife died, you comforted me, saying: "The more suffering one experiences, the more profoundly and radiantly one knows the true value of life. I am confident that you will survive this struggle and become a king among men."

President Ikeda: Just as I had expected, you overcame your hardships with dignity and courage, as a king among men. You endured the most intense sorrow, and this signifies your deep love for your wife. A person who has not tasted the pain of suffering and sorrow can never become a true support for those in distress. Wayne, you were able to overcome your trials and create music that empowers and encourages people all over the world. This is the ultimate victory with which to honor Ana Maria. I am truly happy to know that you are now enjoying life fully and actively with your new, loving family.

My lecture at UCLA in 1974 was the first university talk I had given overseas. Coincidentally, it so happened that in Japan it was April 2, the anniversary of the death of my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. In a sense, I gave the lecture that day in place of, and in honor of, my mentor, who had never taken a trip abroad. In my lecture, I maintained that to resolve the problems facing humankind, it is imperative that all people share a belief in the sanctity of life, a belief that was advocated tirelessly by Mr. Toda. I also included some thoughts about Buddhist perceptions of life based on my dialogue - carried out over two years from 1972 - with the great historian Arnold J. Toynbee. In my lecture, I emphasized that the times demanded nothing short of a transformation from a civilization ravaged by the impulses of the "lesser self" to one based on the noble aspirations of the "greater self." It was around this time that I proposed that the 21st century be named the "Century of Life."

Since then, I have delivered 32 lectures at foreign universities and academic institutions, including Lomonosov Moscow State University, Peking University, Institut de France and Harvard University. This journey began, Wayne, the day I met you.

Mr. Shorter: We had been waiting outside the auditorium, so we were not able to listen to your talk, but the moment that I caught sight of you, the thought crossed my mind that this person coming toward us was indeed our mentor, Ikeda Sensei. That was the instant in which the name that had been engraved in my heart became one with the image of you as a real, live, human being.

President Ikeda: I am sorry to have kept you waiting for such an extremely long time. I apologize again for that. I must say that even though it has been 36 years since our first encounters, the two of you are still just as youthful and fresh. You are even more passionate about your creative and spiritual journeys than you were the day I met you. Nichiren Buddhism is the Buddhism of true cause. One must continually make new beginnings and always strive to progress and shape the future.

Incidentally, speaking of UCLA, I understand that together with members of ICAP [International Committee of Artists for Peace], you held a concert on campus. I heard that the event made a tremendous impression. It was held in December 2007 and attracted 2,000 people. Students also joined in the sessions. The university officials and students said that the performances had surpassed even their highest expectations.

ICAP, which was formed primarily by representatives of the SGI-USA arts department members, is an organization that seeks to inspire and spread a commitment to peace through the medium of art. I have great respect for such a noble desire.

At the concert, a symphony composed by Wayne was performed in honor of my birthday [on Jan. 2]. Also, Herbie performed a piano piece he had composed. Let me express my sincere thanks, again. I later learned that Herbie had stayed up all night and had put the finishing touches on the piece on the morning of the performance.

Mr. Hancock: When I decided to compose a piece of music titled “To My Mentor” as a present for you, President Ikeda, I remember that I felt a very heavy responsibility. I had a number of images that I wanted in the piece. I wanted it to include a sense of appreciation, courage, pioneering spirit, compassion for our members and the wholehearted dedication with which you work for the sake of kosen-rufu, the happiness of each member and for all humanity. I also hoped that I would be able to convey a message of encouragement to all our members.

President Ikeda: You also kindly performed this piece for us six months later on May 4, 2008, at a meeting of the Soka Alumni Association, held at Soka University. The magnificent piece filled the Memorial Hall with rich, melodious cadences that even now resonate in my heart. The visiting professors from Yan’an University, who presented my wife and me with honorary titles that day, and the Soka schools alumni were all deeply impressed. Our friends in the youth division and future division [comprising the elementary school division and the junior high and high school division] also experienced the essence of artistic expression, and I have no doubt that this was infinitely illuminating for them.

Mr. Hancock: It was a great honor for me to perform for you, Sensei, at that most significant award ceremony. Actually, to tell the truth, I wrote out the manuscript for the piece just one week before the event. I worked and worked on it, and even on the day of the performance, a final version still had not been completed.

At that point, I just told myself, this is do-or-die. This was a work designed to praise our mentor! So I stayed up all night and struggled with it until the very last moment. Then, when I started connecting the different parts and figuring out how everything would come together, I started to cry. When that happened, I realized that I was on the right track. I just felt so strongly that I really wanted to touch the hearts of the members, because that is your desire and that is what is in your heart. After we performed the composition, everyone thought it was a beautiful piece. I was deeply touched, and I felt victorious.

Mr. Shorter: I, too, have been inspired by your philosophy of respect for the people, Sensei, and so I have begun to compose a piece of music titled “In Praise of Daisaku Ikeda - Prometheus Unbound” to be performed by a symphony. A part of the piece has been performed for you already, but the symphony accompaniment is still in progress. I am thinking that I would like to depict people’s stories through an orchestral exploration.

President Ikeda: I am deeply grateful. I must say, the scale of the whole piece you plan to compose is quite impressive. The Greek myth of Prometheus tells how he incurred the wrath of the almighty Zeus and was chained to a rock. This was his punishment for giving humankind the gifts of fire, language, music and culture. The powerful gods abhorred the idea of humankind becoming wise and strong. This would make humans difficult to control.

Nichiren proclaimed “we live today in a time of trouble, when there is little that ordinary people can do” (WND-1, 1134). It is most important for people to become empowered. This is the key to transforming the age in which we live.

Jazz is the expressive cry of the soul. It awakens courage and strengthens the human spirit. It enlivens our life force. It unifies people. In that dimension, jazz profoundly resonates with the teachings of Buddhism.

Mr. Shorter: President Ikeda, I will never forget when, in May 2002, you spoke with our ICAP members. The actor Patrick Duffy, the flutist Nestor Torres, the guitarist Larry Coryell, the trumpeter Shunzo Ohno, the Spanish dancers Pascual and Angela Olivera, as well as Herbie and I were all in attendance. On that occasion, you spoke to us about the importance of trust - of trusting one another and the people working with us.

Mr. Hancock: Yes. ICAP was just then being launched, and we felt fortunate to receive your support.

President Ikeda: You had a very close group of people who shared the same objectives - who moved in unison. They were people who possessed both incredible talent and fine character. They gave a marvelous performance at the Soka Gakkai Headquarters Leaders Meeting in the Soka University Auditorium. Everyone was deeply touched by Pascual Olivera's spectacular performance of "Victory Dance," especially since he was ascending the stage, with his wife, to dance for the first time since recovering from a serious illness.

Mr. Shorter: Sensei, you told us, "There's no need to rush or focus on quick results. Take your time, always being mindful and trusting of one another, as Nichiren says, 'It is the heart that is important'" (WND-1, 1000).

Mr. Hancock: Sensei, I remember clearly that you were emphatic about this point. As you said, it is important that we come to trust ourselves and one another. I really feel that trust plays a crucial role in playing jazz and in improvisation. Unless you can trust your partners, you cannot even stand onstage.

Afterward, you turned to Mrs. Ikeda and kept asking: "Have I covered everything that needs to be addressed? I haven't left anything out, have I?" She responded, smiling: "No, everything is fine. You have covered enough."

President Ikeda: Everyone in the group was an outstanding artist. They were my precious, cherished friends and, like treasured brothers and sisters to me, I wanted to speak to them about the truths of life.

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Mr. Hancock: From my experiences visiting Japan, I assumed our meeting with you would be in a certain form. If I were to summon the courage to tell you, President Ikeda, I would say that you are a free-spirited non-conformist. You are a warm and kind person. You are not bound by any one culture. And you pour all your energy into achieving whatever challenging goal lies before you. In this way, all your actions exhibit a rich, pioneering spirit.

An example I could mention is the ways Americans live their lives, refusing to be bound by rules and regulations. Although, at times, they cross the line and overdo this, feeling that they are above the rules. This is an American characteristic and an example of their pioneering spirit.

Where does this characteristic come from? The United States is a vast country. America's population derives, of course, from Native Americans, but most of the people are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. Our ancestors came from every corner of the earth.

President Ikeda: I feel a great attraction to the American people. They are cheerful, have a freedom-loving spirit and a sense of humor, and are kind and hardworking. I believe that a "good American" is simultaneously a "good global citizen" and provides an ideal image of a good human being. This is the kind of person I want to be.

Our first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, was quick to focus on the philosophy of humanism animating the American psyche. In his 1903 publication, *A Geography of Human Life*, Mr. Makiguchi envisioned that to create a peaceful world, humankind must abandon its competitive military, political and economic priorities and, instead, evolve a new model of human interaction called "humanitarian competition." This was a concept applicable to the individual as well as to the international arena. In describing his proposal, he explained that the aim of humanitarian competition is the betterment of others and, by actualizing this concept in everyday life, people discover that their actions yield personal benefit as well as benefit to others (see *A Geography of Human Life*, p. 293). Mr. Makiguchi held high hopes that America and the American people would champion the cause of humanitarian competition. He predicted hopefully that "it is the United States which can play the most dynamic role in the uniting of civilization in the future" (p. 293).

Perhaps most symbolic of this unity is jazz, which was born and nurtured in America and is a musical genre that represents the great soul of global citizens. Herbie and Wayne, thank you for lending your art and creative inspiration to the auspicious occasion of the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Soka Gakkai. I see the two of you as pioneers and active participants in a new American Renaissance, and I am sure that Mr. Makiguchi is happily watching over and blessing our conversations. **WT**