

UConn Hosts Jazz and Human Rights Event

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Ever since the earliest jazz musicians in New Orleans first picked up their instruments and started one of the most influential music revolutions in American history, jazz has been a powerful platform for expressing culture and political discontent. This legacy continues into the present day, as UConn hosted a jazz event on April 7 titled “Justice and Jazz: A Declaration in Seven Movements.”

As a collaboration between the Human Rights Institute and UConn’s jazz program, this event captured the important overlap between artistic expression and human rights. Performers were pianist Earl MacDonald, saxophonist John Mastroianni, trumpeter Louis Hanzlik, bassist Steven Bulmer, trombonist Evan Gray, drummer Jonathan Barber, guitarist Scott Sasanecki and vocalist Leala Cyr. The performance featured seven pieces, each composed by a member of UConn’s Jazz Studies faculty and inspired by an article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also known as the UDHR, is an aspirational document put out by the United Nations in 1948 intended to strive for universal recognition and protection of human rights. Since its release, it has become a cornerstone of human rights history and a symbol towards

which all human rights efforts strive.

The significance of each piece ranged from environmental protection and workers’ rights to women’s rights and freedom, and each piece utilized unique musical elements as well as influences from many different cultures.

Dr. James Waller, director of the Gladstein Family Human Rights Institute and Dodd Chair in Human Rights Practice, helped facilitate the event.

“The collaboration is really just us being a partner, as a co-sponsor,” Waller said. “This is really Earl MacDonald’s project... we’ve talked about it for a couple years, but really the genius of it was bringing a completely different way to approach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

For MacDonald, who is the Director of Jazz Studies at UConn, music continues to have a bright future in terms of championing human rights.

“There’s been a long tradition of jazz musicians speaking to their times, and I envision that continuing,” MacDonald said. “It’s happening currently. There’s many artists that speak about issues that matter most to them... I definitely see that trend continuing. I think it’s part of the music, and it stems from the fact that it is Black American music.”



Beyond the historical and political context of the performance, those in attendance enjoyed the music.

“I thought they were all pretty good,” said Jason Wong, a second-semester undecided student. “I really liked the piece ‘We Are,’ which was the piece with the female vocalist... I really liked how the professor who was introducing it mentioned how the song and the theme around the song is not necessarily about resolving any issues around human rights, but is more just asking everyone to consider something about human rights.”

Indeed, the entire event carried the hopeful air that music will continue to provide a voice for those pushed to the margins.

“Music has often been a significant form of resistance and speaking truth to power in the face of human rights abuses... I think this is a perfect marriage of those two.” Waller stated.

As we continue to navigate the turbulent landscape of human rights in the current day, music remains a poignant outlet for expression, culture and creativity. As MacDonald’s parting comment put it, “we all need to be speaking up and expressing our opinions, and as artists, I do think it is our responsibility.”



Student performers and faculty smile for a picture. UConn hosted an event that explored the connection between jazz and human rights through the Gladstein Family Human Rights Institute.

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