

IN CONCERT

Jazz trailblazer Jamal inspires, creates, tours

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Jay-Z, John Legend, will.i.am, De La Soul and Nas have sampled Ahmad Jamal’s music.

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“I’d like to collect some of the money,” the jazz pianist said about the borrowing and laughed. “There are a lot of samples of Mr. Jamal, a lot.”

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While some 60 rap songs feature Jamal samples according to whosampled.com, one jazz star paid tribute to the legend in June. Michael Franks name-drops the icon in his single, “Now That the Summer’s Here”: “I can spare some wherewithal/Listening to Ahmad Jamal/‘Poinciana’ says it all/Now that the summer’s here.”

“That’s very flattering; I was very happy to see that,” Jamal said of the nod from Franks. “I’m very flattered because that was one of my monumental records, if not my most historic record, and I appreciate its longevity.”

“Poinciana” is Jamal’s signature tune. The instrumental was a smash in 1958, and that kept his album, “But Not For Me,” on the best-selling charts for 108 weeks.

“The song was a hit already, but we revised it and made it a monumental hit,” Jamal said during a call from his Massachusetts home. “The treatment that we gave it is what made it outstanding.

“And that’s the phenomenal thing about American classic music: We interpret the works of authors and composers beyond their wildest dreams, as was the case of John Coltrane’s ‘My Favorite Things.’ That’s not John’s song; it’s a little tribute piece he made famous. And that’s what we do in this business, whether it’s Sarah Vaughan or me or Duke Ellington.”

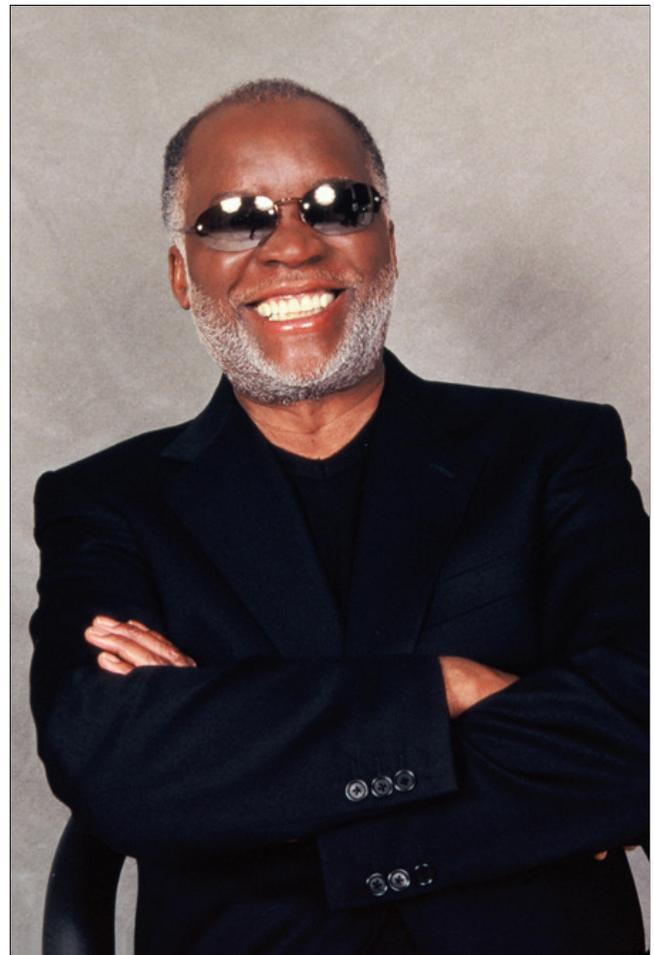
Listening to the piano genius’s early records, they sound as good today as when they were released.

“Good music is never old,” Jamal said. “Once [songs are] done in a certain fashion, they become ageless.”

Kind of like the 81-year-old musician. Critics raved over 2010’s “A Quiet Time,” and he’s working on a new disc.

“I’m busily preparing for Oct. 3, 4 and 5; I’ll be in the studio in New York recording,” he said. “I’ve got a song I wrote about Italy and I like it very much.”

Jamal’s mastery of the keys includes inventive rhythmic approaches, daring solos and the use of space and silence in his music. The composer was a major influence on



Jamal

trumpeter Miles Davis, among others.

For his contributions, Jamal was named a National Endowment for the Arts American Jazz Master and a Duke Ellington Fellow at Yale University. Last year, the French government appointed him an officer of the Order of Arts and Letters.

He recalled when he first sat on a piano bench: “My uncle was playing when I was 3 years old, and he was asking me, ‘Can you do that?’ I sat down at the piano and played every note he was playing, and the rest is history,” Jamal said. “It wasn’t my choice, the piano chose me.”

Jamal will take the stage at the University of Michigan’s Hill Auditorium at 8 p.m. Sept. 17. He will be joined by bass player James Cammack, drummer Herlin Riley and percussionist Manolo Badrena. Tickets range from \$10 to \$46.

“We just went to Russia, and people knew my work as soon as I sat down. I don’t speak Russian, but my music speaks for me,” Jamal said. “[Music’s] a powerful language, a universal language, certainly one that helps the world be a little more at peace.”

Tags: [Ahmad Jamal](#), [Ann Arbor](#), [De La Soul](#), [Jay-Z](#), [John Legend](#), [Nas](#), [will.i.am](#)

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