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Ahmad Jamal, Barbican, London

By Mike Hobart

The pianist and his flawless band took stock ingredients and used them as a starting point for a magical mystery tour of modern music

Ahmad Jamal's sharp-suited rhythms and hipster's sense of space were drawing accolades even before he released his first recordings in the mid-1950s – an up-and-coming Miles Davis was to claim that “all my inspiration comes from Ahmad Jamal.” The first catchy riff and well-spaced pedal at the Barbican showed why this might have been so. Jamal could have rested on his laurels – he established a firm fan base with his 1958 recording of “Poinciana” – but the pianist's current band is a cutting-edge quartet whose rhythmic virtuosity matches even Jamal's vivid imagination and darting flights of fancy.

Jamal takes a stock ingredient – a four-note motif or simple riff, a ballad snippet or soul-jazz line – and uses it as a starting point and foundation for a magical mystery tour of modern music. The opening composition, a new piece called “Saturday Morning”, was sustained by the simplest of riffs, the most basic of funky beats and a chorus-ending “Aahh!” sung quietly by percussionist Manuel Badrena.

With the scene set, Jamal embroidered with raucous thumps and short twinkling lines, full-pedal rumbles and whisper-quiet mists of impressionist chords. The band followed each move and brief change of key, added breaks and turned on a pinhead, ever watchful for the brief signals that guided them.

Each tune followed a similarly zig-zag path. “This is the Life” twisted soul-jazz comfort into unexpected shapes and rolling tremolo chords, while a firm and funky “Invitation” developed atonal extremes. Ballads launched internal dialogues of swathed harmonies and cut-off runs, delayed tempos and shifts in time, each one coming as Jamal's fancy took him. And just as one rabbit too many seemed about to emerge from the hat, the band settled on a pulse of gathering power.

Such a fractured discourse could easily have become tiresome through repetition, but Jamal is a master of suspense and surprise, and his band is so fine-tuned as to sound flawless. Percussionist Badrena, drummer Herlin Riley and bassist Reginald Veal played with the same clarity and poise as their leader – each strum, rattle and swish was a perfect fit – and delivered masterclass solos

that only peaked midway through the triple-encore.



www.ahmadjamal.net

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