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Ahmad Jamal, Royal Festival Hall - music review

The Pittsburgh piano veteran made every song his own and an unbroken sense of swing prevailed



Genius: Ahmad Jamal (Picture: Martin Bureau/AFP/Getty)



Published: 28 January 2014
 Updated: 10:35, 28 January 2014

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Critic Rating ★★★★★

Reader Rating

Stay scarce and keep your price high, they say. But at the Barbican last February Ahmad Jamal had left it so long that most younger listeners had never heard of him. The wily Pittsburgh piano veteran won them over with his extraordinary range of thunderous power, sudden tenderness and all the other quick-change delights a great jazz pianist can produce. It was a sensational performance that shrieked for an encore.

Last night his line-up was unchanged, with Manolo Badrena, former hand-drummer of choice to Miles Davis and Weather Report, beside two New Orleans stalwarts from Wynton Marsalis's Lincoln Center orchestra, Reginald Veal and Herlin Riley on double-bass and drums. Riley was on tremendous form, his response crisp and precise to Jamal's countless stop-start signals to change tempos and beat-patterns. No number escaped this radical overhaul, and it was thanks to Jamal's genius that despite everything an unbroken sense of swing prevailed.

He played Saturday Morning, the title track of his current album, and Silver, dedicated to fellow pianist Horace Silver, now in ill health. I'm in the Mood for Love, Laura and My Foolish Heart were lifted from the Great American Songbook but with their songlines distorted, like a Gerald Scarfe caricature, to the outer limits of recognition.

Jamal jazz was even forged successfully from Yours Is My Heart Alone, a light-operatic gem associated with Richard Tauber, the chest-beating Austrian tenor who made Thirties hearts flutter. It worked because, like Tauber, Jamal makes every song his own. His style thus remains agelessly hip. He doesn't need to mess with singers or keyboard electronics to attract new audiences. Most music-lovers will recognise true creativity when they hear it.

