

Ahmad Jamal is still surprising at 84



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Pianist Ahmad Jamal performs at Symphony Center in downtown Chicago on Friday. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

When Ahmad Jamal sits down to work, he's not just playing the piano – he's playing the band.

With a pointed finger, he cues one musician for a solo that may last but a bar or two. With two open palms, he signals a slight crescendo, then suddenly turns his hands down to bring a quick hush to the ensemble before moving on to something utterly different.

Above all, Jamal stands as a master colorist, orchestrating his work on the spot, shaping sonic textures that never settle in but instead constantly evolve. At 84, he controlled the flow of instrumental sound as skillfully as ever Friday night in Orchestra Hall, where Jamal launched the Symphony Center jazz season to standing ovations that opened and closed a sensuously attractive performance.

The accolades surely reflected not only Jamal's august age and long history in jazz but his deep roots in Chicago, where his career took flight in 1958 with the release of "Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing: But Not For Me." A lesser pianist

might easily have become a one-hit wonder, but Jamal continued to search for new tones, just as he did during this intermissionless performance.

He opened with his impressionistic "Autumn Rain," from the "Blue Moon" album of 2012, his pianism a riot of color and surprise. Elegantly voiced chords morphed into sharp snippets of melody, glistening scales climaxed with sudden silences, whispered figures up in the stratosphere of the piano were answered with rumbling double octaves down below.

All the while Jamal's colleagues stayed close, awaiting the next cue, the next abrupt shift, the next swift change in direction. Herlin Riley, an admired New Orleans drummer, stayed alert, his playing more understated, nimble and controlled than in any other context that comes to mind. Exactly how he dovetailed his meticulously articulated rhythms with percussionist Manolo Badrena's wash of sound was something of a mystery, but in tandem with bassist Reginald Veal they mirrored Jamal's mercurial music-making and expanded upon it.

When Jamal delved into a standard, such as "Blue Moon," he didn't play the head of the tune and offer transformations of it, as jazz convention might dictate. On the contrary, he telegraphed mere fragments of the famous melody, then produced swirls of sound around them. A shard of melody bobbed up now and then, but it was the soft storm of ensemble improvisation that mattered most. Jamal floated phrases at one moment, swung them the next, then brought everything to a startling pause an instant later. There was no way of anticipating what was going to happen next.

And yet in the midst of this seemingly free-wheeling music-making, Jamal and friends somehow stopped on a dime at certain junctures, as if it were all preordained. In essence, Jamal's quartet achieved tremendous freedom within structure, which perhaps is what jazz always has sought to do.

The title cut of Jamal's "Saturday Morning" album, of last year, sounded even more gestural, Jamal's quartet creating music that often avoided melody, backbeat, you name it. This was all about atmosphere and color, one lush ensemble sound giving way to another and another. The pianist's delicate piano figures inspired mists of music from the rest of the band, the players interchanging ideas with remarkable fluidity.

Even Duke Ellington's "I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good," also from "Saturday Morning," frequently veered away from the beloved melody, Jamal instead preferring to splinter, rearrange and interrupt it. His quotations from Billy Strayhorn's "Take the 'A' Train" periodically punctuated the proceedings, a silvery little motif serving as a way for listeners to try to get their bearings.

There's something inherently radical about Jamal's pointillistic approach to the art of jazz pianism, his methods still a bit unnerving to behold more than half a century after he conceived them. Maybe it's the elegance of his keyboard tone and the shimmer of his ensemble sound that welcomes listeners into a music that otherwise sabotages audience expectation.

Toward the end of the evening, Jamal indulged his listeners in a signature hit, "Poinciana," from the "At the Pershing" album. This was not just a tonally glowing performance but a nod to the pianist's autobiography.

"It all started right here," a broadly smiling Jamal told the cheering crowd.

Fortunately, it continues.

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