

Ahmad Jamal at 84: Still inventing



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Jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal performs on stage at the Royal Festival Hall in London, United Kingdom. (Andy Sheppard / Redferns via Getty Images)

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Without the piano innovations of Ahmad Jamal, would the breakthroughs of contemporary keyboard lions such as Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, Matthew Shipp and others be possible?

True, none of those artists sounds quite like Jamal, but no one really does – his music is too volatile, mercurial and startlingly unpredictable for anyone to imitate persuasively. But the freedom that Jamal declared at the piano more than half a century ago surely opened up new possibilities in sound for any jazz pianist who touched the instrument after hearing him.

No longer would pianists feel tethered to comfortable backbeats, conventional song structures, ornate bebop syntax

and the like. Instead, Jamal offered up jagged shards of melody, striking chord clusters, abrupt silences, open spaces and an emphasis on gesture, color and mood. A palpable tension has coursed through Jamal's recordings and live performances, making his music as gripping as it was innovative.

Remarkably, Jamal at 84 still sounds fresh and perpetually modern at the piano, as his recent performances and recordings have affirmed. So where does his knack for perpetual surprise come from?

"Music and life in my opinion are about discovery," says Jamal, who will open Symphony Center's jazz season Friday night in Orchestra Hall leading his quartet. "You have to discover things. I don't care if you're a journalist or a musician or a doctor or an Indian chief.

"You don't create anything. You can't create a fly or a raindrop. How do you do that? You try and be in tune with life and all the wonderful things it has to offer, so you can discover. I try to discover things every day, musically."

Maybe that's it. Maybe when Jamal is at the piano he's taking us on a freewheeling exploration into sound, the pianist darting restlessly from one idea to the next, from one discovery to another. At one moment, he tosses off a technically brilliant passage worthy of Franz Liszt. At the next, he produces an impressionistic series of chords evoking Claude Debussy. Then he swings hard for a few bars before stopping and proceeding to something entirely different.

It's a stylistically far-reaching brand of pianism that draws on Jamal's wide-open ears but not necessarily one that would seem to have been destined for wide popularity. Yet in 1958 Jamal released a recording that clung to the Billboard charts for more than two years, positioned him as a bona fide jazz star and forever linked him to the city where it was recorded: Chicago.

"Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing: But Not For Me" documented his ephemeral pianism and ran counter to what most everyone else was playing in the late 1950s, from classic bebop to hard-bop to cool-jazz idioms. Yet "Pershing" tracks such as "Poinciana" and "But Not for Me" became radio hits and have long since been enshrined as jazz classics, underscoring the paradoxical nature of Jamal's art: a hyper-sophisticated musical language that reached the masses.

How did it happen?

"What influenced me is the fortunate thing that we don't have often: I became an artist-in-residence at a place called the Pershing," says Jamal, referring to the lounge in the long-gone Pershing Hotel on the South Side of Chicago. "When you're working every night, five, six nights a week in the same ensemble, magic happens. Magical things happen. Wonderful things happen.

"So that and support by some of the finest musicians in the world," adds Jamal, referring to bassist Israel Crosby and drummer Vernel Fournier, his trio partners at the Pershing. "Certain things happen when you can stay and play every night, but that doesn't happen (anymore). You don't have many rooms where you can sit and stay there."

Did Jamal have any sense that "Pershing" would emerge as the pop hit and jazz landmark it became?

"I wanted to record at the Pershing (because) I knew we had something," says Jamal. "I didn't know we'd get that many, but I knew I'd get one or two people who would like what we were doing. ... I spent eight or nine days mastering, editing and programming. I spent a lot of time picking eight tracks out of 43. What I did was diametrically opposed to (radio) airplay. Nobody was playing 7:45 minute recordings. We weren't going to get any airplay, according to the rule of thumb. But what happened?"

"Poinciana," "But Not For Me" and other tracks saturated the airwaves and still turn up with regularity on terrestrial and satellite radio alike. Perhaps there's no definitive explanation for why this music seduced so many people and continues to do so, but Jamal has come to his own conclusions.

"Pershing" enticed listeners, he says, "because it was a record composed (of) – made up of a lot of interesting textures. Lot of textures. ... The lines that Israel (Crosby) played, for example, people are still trying to emulate. ... It was the textures, it was the things that we were doing. ... Improvisation is an acquired skill. It's not an accident."

Jamal's mastery of that art was hard won. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, he was drawn to the piano at age 3, received classical training and was out playing on the road as a teenager. He first came to Chicago in 1948, he says, when "they still had jitneys on South Park – it's probably not even called South Park anymore." Indeed, it's King Drive.

The scene was rich.

"63d Street was alive and well," remembers Jamal. "You could see (saxophonist) Lester Young walking up and down the street with his pork pie hat. You had the great saxophonists – Von Freeman. I worked with Von when I first went there. All of us were struggling."

Jamal believes the essence of his radical approach to the piano was in place when he came to Chicago, though not fully formed. "Maybe in a timid fashion," he says. "Naturally, you don't have as much confidence, but that's everybody. Evolution: You crawl, you walk and you run."

Even before the success of "Pershing," Jamal had attracted attention from cognoscenti, most notably Miles Davis, who long cited the pianist as a key influence.

"I had gone to hear (Jamal) once I was out that way (in Chicago), and he knocked me out with his concept of space, his lightness of touch, his understatement and the way he phrased notes and chords and passages," Davis famously observed in "Miles Davis: The Autobiography" (with Quincy Troupe). "I loved his lyricism on piano, the way he played and the spacing he used in the ensemble voicing of his groups."

After the success of "Pershing," Jamal briefly opened his own club in Chicago, the Alhambra, an experience he looks upon today as "a nightmare. That's why I closed it."

By the early 1960s he'd moved to New York to pursue a lifelong dream of studying at the Juilliard School but found himself in too much demand as a performer to do so. Perhaps that was for the best. Jamal's music bristles with the kind of inventiveness that cannot be taught. It continues to this day, his novel ideas and ferocious spontaneity distinguishing his two most recent albums, "Blue Moon" (2012) and "Saturday Morning" (2013).

What has Chicago meant to him?

"That's where my career was launched," he says. "Chicago is my second home, absolutely, always will be. And not only that, it was a melting pot for a tremendous amount of talent.

"If you can make it in Chicago, you can make it anywhere in the world – you can make it in New York," says Jamal, paraphrasing a song about that other great American metropolis. "We didn't stand back for New York. We joined New York and they joined us. We weren't afraid of New York at all."

Or anything else.

The Ahmad Jamal Quartet, with bassist Reginald Veal, drummer Herlin Riley and percussionist Manolo Badrena, plays at 8 p.m. Friday in Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$28-\$70; 312-294-3000 or cso.org.

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