

Ahmad Jamal Soars Over the "Blue Moon" (2012, Jazz Village)



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Although his music has been in the limelight for more than six decades, Ahmad Jamal has not been taken for granted. The French Jazz Academy named his *Complete Ahmad Jamal Trio Argo Sessions 1956-62* (Mosaic) Best Reissue of the Year, and the readers of *DownBeat* voted him into the Hall of Fame in late 2011. Jamal, now 81, could just coast along without dimming the glow. But anyone who has had the fortune to see him live over the past few years has witnessed just the opposite-- an artist who seems to grow younger and more open every year. Two years after the success of his chart-topping Dreyfus release, *Quiet Time*, Jamal has reconstituted his ensemble and come back with *Blue Moon: The New York Session*, a stunning debut on the French label, Jazz Village.

Blue Moon finds Jamal in New York's Avatar Studios with veterans Reginald Veal on bass and Herlin Riley on drums, and frequent cohort Manolo Badrena on Latin percussion. The nine tracks cover diverse sources, from Jamal himself (3 originals) to American themes in film, Broadway, pop, and jazz. The Rodgers and Hart title track is given a heavy dose of Latinization, thanks to Riley and Badrena—it might be a “blue moon” but it rises over tropical sands, scrambling through trademark Jamal shifts in tempo, register, and rhythm. “Laura” (Raskin and Mercer) has a gentle ambience but Jamal paints a multi-hued tapestry of sound with the barest of accompaniment from Veal.

The surprising, jerky syncopation of “Gypsy” is followed by an extended (13 minutes) “Invitation,” propelled by a funky overdrive that counters Jamal’s lyrical interludes, perhaps summing his current eclecticism better than any other track here—one of those “invitations” you can’t refuse. The other lengthy excursion is Jamal’s own melodic reverie, “I Remember Italy,” the pianist supported by elegant bowed basslines from Veal alone for the first 4 minutes before shifting into gentle quartet mode; Badrena even adds some faint bird chirps and tinkling bells midway as if the ensemble has stumbled into an enchanted garden. But the star is Jamal, his touch elegant throughout, be it in trilling chordal motions, lightly articulated storylines or regal summations. The set closes with a reworking of Dizzy Gillespie’s “Woody ‘N You,” a favorite that Jamal first recorded back in 1958. Here it moves south of the border with just a touch of samba seeping through the post-bop crevices, as joyful as Ahmad himself.

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