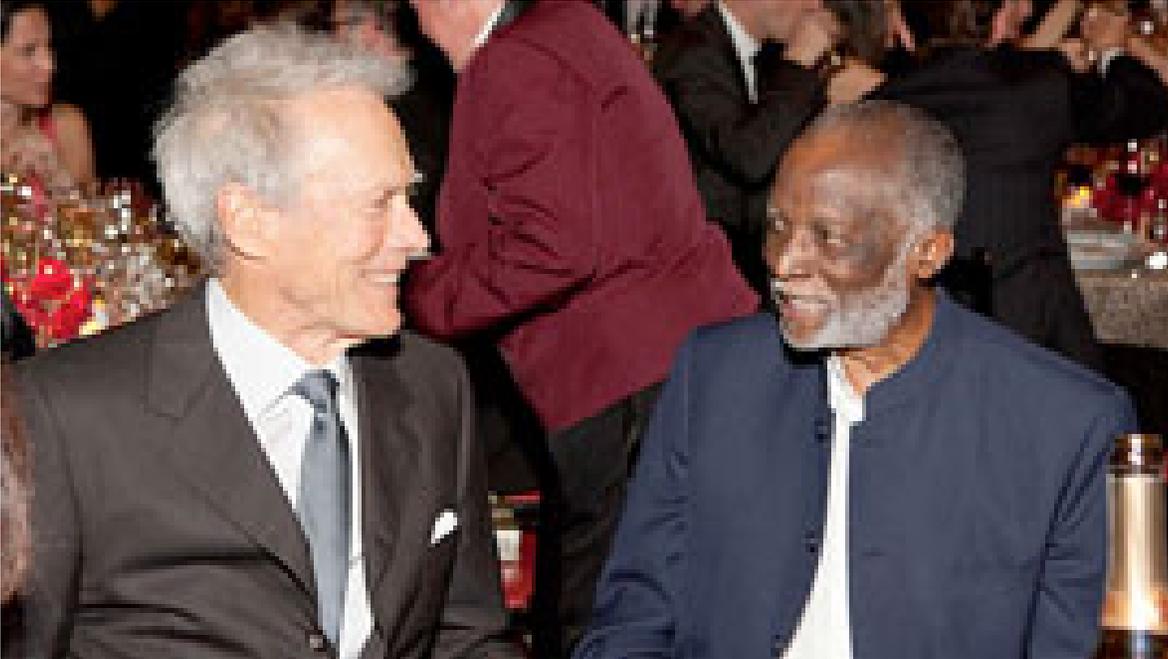


SFJAZZ Gala Offers a Tuneful Tribute to Ahmad Jamal

Jennifer Raiser · May 9, 2012 · 2 Comments



When **Clint Eastwood** was asked to present to SFJAZZ honors to pianist **Ahmad Jamal**, his immediate response was, “where and when?” Jamal commands that level of absolute respect from jazz aficionados, many of whom gathered at Bimbo’s 365 club to see and hear both the presenter the honoree. What they saw and heard in the interim was equally compelling, as the [SFJAZZ Collective](#) and the SFJAZZ High School Allstars turned it up for Jamal in front of a sold-out gala called, “Freedom in the Groove.” The evening was as jam-packed as the arrivals lobby where jazz greats and those who love them were greeted by old and new friends and fans. The fan fare was mighty impressive, with filmmaker **Phil Kaufman**, theater director **Jonathan Moscone**, and authors **Amy Tan**, **Michael Chabon**, **Ayelet Waldman**, and **Daniel Handler**, among others, all gathering as guests. Arrivals were greeted with a choice of Roederer Estate champagne or bourbon shots, which revved-up the enthusiastic crowd even further; by the time nearly all of them were personally welcomed by Honorary Chair **Robert Mailer Anderson** in his leopard-lapel dinner jacket, they were giddy with anticipation of the musical feast in store. Perceptive eyes could

recognize Humanitarian Award winner **Chris Tucker**, NAACP President **Benjamin Jealous**, vibraphonist **Bobby Hutcherson**, and publisher **Nion McEvoy** in their midst. Once guests were settled at their tables, they could tuck into the delectable dinner prepared by Slanted Door's **Charles Phan**, and drink the bottle of bubbly thoughtfully presented for each table. Presentations were made from Photographer Laureate **Jim Goldberg** and Poet Laureate **Ishmael Reed**, but the most compelling was made to 17-year-old **Tracy Fitzsimmons**, who received the High School All-Stars Award for Excellence and the surprise gift of a first-rate trumpet which had belonged to Anderson. When Fitzsimmons picked it up and blew a few riffs, giving a very public audition to a very fine instrument, the crowd knew they were witnessing a jazz great at the start of his career. And then it was time for Jamal to play in his gorgeous, mellifluous style. Creeping into the tune like a slow-moving fog, playing only what is essential, Jamal's performance left no doubt about his greatness. Even Eastwood's arrival in a blaze of photo flashes did not detract, and then they were there onstage, congratulating one another as fast friends and seasoned professionals, their identical 82 years worn very lightly on their shoulders. **Stevie Wonder** telephoned in his congratulations, accolades were exchanged, and the good vibes were palpable. Much was made of the new SFJAZZ Center, the only freestanding building devoted to jazz in America, which is now under construction in Hayes Valley and scheduled to open in early 2013. With just 14% of the funds left to raise for the \$63 million project, there was hope that the final portion was resting in the pocket of someone in the room. By the time the dessert was cleared and **Maceo Parker's** band had begun to play, the music had worked its magic on every guest. As each guest departed with a delightfully laden **Marc Jacobs** tote, the metaphor was clear: jazz is an abundant gift which we are fortunate and grateful to receive.