

Jazz

Ahmad Jamal

Barbican, London

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John L Walters

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A master ... Seventy-five-year-old Ahmad Jamal

Like Cream, Ahmad Jamal's trio is an influential outfit, hugely successful in its time, whose place in history can be underestimated. His early music had a wide public as a kind of 1950s chillout music, yet he also exerted a considerable influence on Miles Davis (check out Jamal's sublime composition New Rumba, on Miles Ahead).

Yet Jamal's appeal doesn't rest on nostalgia. The pianist is now 75, and his bandmates, promoters and admirers tend to be younger (though few in the audience are as elegantly turned out as Jamal). The trio played a stunning, long single set, urgent, virtuosic and beautiful.

Jamal's repertoire is divided between ingenious originals such as After Fajr and In Search Of and standards such as But Not For Me and The Boy Next Door, where he creates towering improvisational structures on pop song foundations.

His solos sometimes essay little history lessons, effortlessly referencing Tatum, Powell and Monk in a brief sequence. There's an admirable combination of wit and dignity in the way Jamal plays, and it extends to his body language - he has an appealing habit of standing up at the piano occasionally to throw down an isolated phrase or single chord,

sometimes shouting "hey" or "yeah" in punctuation.

Idris Muhammad (drums) and James Cammack (bass) are exemplary foils for Jamal, creating a dynamic, sometimes hypnotic pulse that allows the leader to be as bombastic or as spacious as he wishes. Muhammad gets a great acoustic sound from his kit, with a flexible, quietly funky timbre that connects Jamal's approach to contemporary trios such as Medeski Martin and Wood and EST.

When the three men walk to the front of the stage to acknowledge the applause there is an enormous swell of pride and appreciation from the audience. We may have come to pay tribute to an overlooked legend, but what we heard was a stunning performance by a master.

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