

Ahmad Jamal at the Barbican

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Sometimes it seemed as if there were four percussionists on stage. Ahmad Jamal's piano playing is so drenched in rhythm that his quartet can make a sliver of sotto voce melody, twisted this way and that, survive infinite permutations. Whenever he locked into a leisurely vamp with the drummer Herlin Riley, the bassist Reginald Veal and the congas, timbales and chimes of Manolo Badrena, the Weather Report veteran, the 82-year-old master from Pittsburgh proved that you do not need decibels to make gloriously vibrant music.

In the course of two hours, with no interval, Jamal - the greatest living jazz musician, in my opinion - never came close to losing his grip on the audience. If you wanted to carp, you could argue that the passages when the ghost of Art Tatum seized control of the keyboard and wove flowery cascades of notes occasionally interrupted the flow.

For the rest, though, it was a question of marvelling at the near-telepathic group interplay and subtle dynamics. Even if he walks a little more stiffly than before, the passing years hardly seem to have affected his ability to reshape pieces such as *Laura* and *Blue Moon*.

Less is always more with Jamal. Like Monk, Jamal makes empty spaces sing. And his band's pulse, so buoyant and supple, often has more of a flavour of West Africa and the Caribbean than conventional, four-to-the-beat swing.

Badrena, somewhat distractingly busy at one side of the stage, has grown into his role. And if it once seemed impossible to imagine a replacement for that peerless drummer Idris Muhammad, Riley comes very close indeed. At the end we all expected an encore of Jamal's classic version of *Poinciana*. For the first time I can remember, he decided not to play it. But who could complain? It was just one more surprise in an evening of stunning sleight of hand.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/livereviews/article3683894.ece>