

[Review: Ahmad Jamal Quartet at the Barbican](#)



Ahmad Jamal at the Barbican. Photo credit: Roger Thomas. All Rights Reserved

**Ahmad Jamal Quartet**  
**(Barbican, 8 February 2013; review and drawing below by Geoff Winston)**

'Mr Jamal is always on top of his art.' Seydou Barry's on-stage introduction was spot on - as producer on **Ahmad Jamal's** latest album, *'Blue Moon'*, he should know. Jamal acknowledges the profundity of the jazz genre and has coined the epithet ACM (American Classical Music) to better describe the music.

This immaculate quartet concert at the Barbican made his case with consummate elegance. With its mixture of musical empathy and virtuosity, intelligence was written all over every minute of their near two hour performance. No scores, everything left to chance yet nothing left to chance, rigorously rehearsed, they made an indelible mark. Memorable for the lightest of touches on his early classics - *'Chamber Music of the New Jazz'* and *'Live at the Pershing'* - Jamal has extended his musical vision and repertoire immeasurably, and in his eighty-third year he demonstrated that his razor sharp technique is enviably unmatched.

Like Martial Solal, another exceptional pianist of a similar vintage, he demonstrated untrammelled freshness and dexterity in his imaginative application to the possibilities that the piano reveals. He flipped with lightning speed from brightly flowing caresses of the keyboard to densely soaked chordal encrustations. His tinkling upper register interpretations of melodic figures - including his own *'Autumn Rain'* and favourites to which he returns, *'This is the Life'* and *'Laura'* - were complemented by heftily grounded, arpeggio-rich explorations and a facility which can only be described as breathtaking.

Jamal directed every move of the exquisite rhythm trio of **Herlin Riley** (drums), **Reginald Veal** (bass) and percussionist **Manuel Badrena** with a keen alertness and humility, pointing at key moments to the players as they passed the initiative around. Badrena, who changed the perception of the percussionist in his work with Weather Report, added the sheer enjoyment and mystery of a Latin dimension through bells, cuica and Pascoal-tinged vocalisings.

Riley and Veal have few equals - Eric Harland and Reuben Rogers spring to mind - in their impeccable, minimally accented timekeeping. Riley supplied the merest of metronomic ticks, overtaken by insistent funk backbeats which never seemed out of place, handling each with both restraint and verve. Veal put down key repetitive phrases, which in this context were perfectly placed. As he handed them to Jamal, they explored all their potential rather than leaning on them for support. They showed how, in the right hands, the simplest of tunes is never simple.

Jamal's unimpaired solo extemporisations, balancing the group excursions, were quite magical in their concentrated understatement, and each of his trio was given sufficient room to show just how brilliant they were in their own right.

Jamal has said that he doesn't 'believe we're "creative", that the most we can do is discover, receive.' - and this voyage of discovery was a pure joy. As the man in the next seat to me said - 'I could listen to him play all night.' I couldn't have agreed more. The concert was an absolute delight.



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