

Ahmad Jamal: A deliciously talented musician

Ivan Hewett pays tribute to jazz giant Ahmad Jamal, who has a brilliant new album out called *Blue Moon* and who shone at his recent Barbican concert.



Ahmad Jamal Photo: www.ahmadjamal.net

By Ivan Hewett, Music Critic

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Every now and then a jazz album comes along that becomes an obsession. Ahmad Jamal's recent trio album *Blue Moon* is one. I keep listening to certain passages, enjoying the inexplicable way Jamal makes silence eloquent, and the way he interchanges the trio's roles, lending rhythmic energy to his drummer rather than vice versa. Like all true art it has a surface which instantly seduces, but also promises some never-to-be-reached mystery underneath.

Blue Moon is the latest album to appear from the veteran pianist, who had a big commercial hit in 1959 with a sultry number called *Poinciana*. Some jazz aficionados have never quite forgiven him for that. The suspicion still lingers that he's a high-class cocktail-lounge pianist, a view that surfaced in some of the album reviews. It's the old snobbery, now firmly installed in some jazz quarters, that whatever seems natural and easy can't be 'deep'.

Pianists who exude an air of agonised profundity, knit their brows and display their kinship to classical music are the ones now in vogue. Jamal refuses to play that game, which is why he's been somewhat sidelined in the rush to praise 'intellectual' pianists such as Jarrett. People with real insight see through all that. Miles Davis said everything he did was influenced by Jamal.

Stanley Crouch, most severe of jazz critics, hails Jamal as the most innovative figure in jazz after Charlie Parker. Earlier this month Jamal and his trio gave a concert at the Barbican as part their album tour. It showed that despite his 82 years, he's as sharp and relaxed as ever. He still enjoys those slinky Latin-flavoured numbers that made him famous. When Jamal plays he doesn't knot his brow, he smiles, and he enjoys naive things like the glittery colour-change you get by rolling a hand in one direction along the black keys, and then in the other along the white.

When he latches on to a delicious harmonic move – as he did in Saturday Morning – he repeats it shamelessly. And he never follows that jazz cliché of allowing a number to drift away on a remote harmony. He brings it to an end smartly, and makes sure the trio do too, with a casually commanding forefinger.

Though Jamal refuses to appear 'intellectual', he's a supremely intelligent musician. Autumn Rain began with a typically barnstorming introduction which careered through a dozen key-centres, before the trio discreetly restored order with a soft rhythmic bed. Having opened up a vast space, Jamal suddenly closed it in. He returned again and again to the melody's tiny opening phrase, shifting its position in the bar, adding a note here, subtracting one there.

Keeping a sense of parsimony and focus, alongside bursts of wild exuberance; this is Jamal's secret. It gives his music-making a delicious ease. We can follow his abstruse harmonic explorations and finger-twisting runs (Jamal has an astonishing technique), because they're so securely rooted in something simple. It's all there on the album, which has that mysterious feeling of being already a classic.



Ahmad Jamal's Blue Moon is out now on Jazz Village

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