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2

Live Reviews

Ahmad Jamal at Vicar Street, Dublin



By [IAN PATTERSON](#), Published: February 2, 2014

Ahmad Jamal

[Vicar Street](#)

Dublin

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It's been a banner year for fans of jazz piano in Dublin, with solo concerts by [Keith Jarrett](#) and [Brad Mehldau](#) bookending 2013. Influential to both these pianists was NEA Jazz Master [Ahmad Jamal](#), so it was fitting in a way that he should give his first performance in Ireland in a dozen years so soon after two of the most important pianists of the past forty years. Jamal was promoting his two most recent, critically acclaimed releases, [Blue Moon](#) (Jazz Village, 2012) and [Saturday Morning](#) (Jazz Village, 2013) and a full house at Vicar Street was testament to the pulling power the 83-year still exerts.

That Jamal was in Dublin at all was due to the efforts of Dominic Reilly, whose production company Teddy D Promotions has got off to a flying start in its first year, hosting concerts by drummer [Jimmy Cobb](#), the trio of guitarist [Peter Bernstein](#), keyboardist [Larry Goldings](#) and drummer [Bill Stewart](#), as well as German singer [Olivia Trummer](#). Luring Jamal to Ireland was a major feather in Reilly's cap and a clear sign of his ambition to bring the very best jazz musicians to the Irish capital.

The first surprise of the evening was the sight of bassist [James Cammack](#) taking to the stage. Cammack came from obscurity—with due respect to West Point—to play alongside Jamal for 29 years before being replaced by [Reginald Veal](#) in 2012. This gig was a late addition to Jamal's short European tour and Cammack was subbing, with Veal due to join Jamal for the remaining dates. Despite the stop-gap nature of their reunion it was thrilling to see Cammack and Jamal sparking each other once more.

As soon as he walked on stage Jamal was conducting; a clap of the hands ignited the engine of Cammack, drummer [Herlin Riley](#) and percussionist [Manolo Badrena](#), who launched into "Baalbeck." For the next twenty five minutes Jamal led the quartet through mazy improvisational territory that leaned rather heavily on Riley's tremendous rhythmic bustle and Badrena's colorful impressionism. Jamal—along with trumpeter [Dizzy Gillespie](#)—was one of the first to employ a percussionist in a small ensemble, though these days he thrives on greater rhythmic muscle than in years gone by. The rhythmic pulses in his own playing were implied in the pockets of repose as much as they were in his thunderous chords and stabbing punctuation.

After such an opening onslaught the beguiling melody and seductive gait of "Saturday Morning" came as a welcome relief. Having seemingly retired "Poinciana" from his live sets after fifty five years, the graceful, lyrical "Saturday Morning" made a fine substitute signature number. A

bubbling version of "Blue Moon" provided another set highlight. With Jamal vamping on the motif Riley unleashed cracking patterns before the pianist reinstated the melody, embellishing it with scurrying runs and melodic flurries. Cammack also stretched out with his habitual swing and verve of old before the pulsating drum and percussion-driven fireworks sounded the conclusion to the first set.

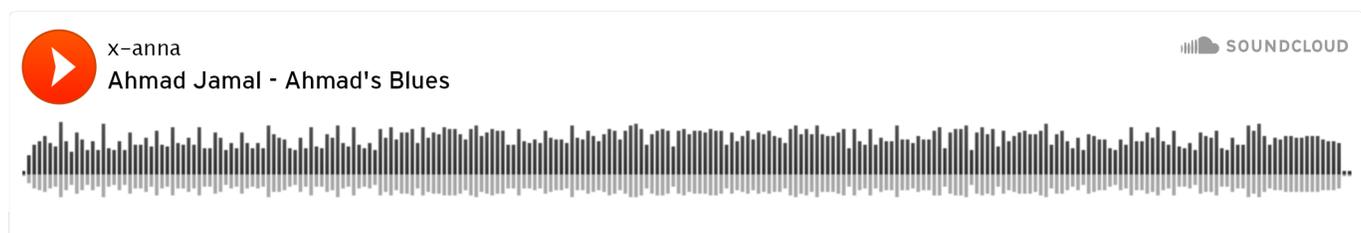
The second set picked up where the energy levels of the first left off, with the rhythmically propulsive "Back to the Future." Jamal's free-flowing right hand and vamping left combined spectacularly, with quotations from singer [Joni Mitchell's](#) "Centerpiece" and trumpeter [Lee Morgan's](#) "Sidewinder" thrown in for good measure. Jamal's only concession to the Great American Songbook during the evening was the Marjorie Goetschius/Edna Osser number "I'll Always Be With You," a timely reminder in the midst of so much rumbling bravura of Jamal's finesse and unmistakable romanticism. He remains a unique and nuanced balladeer.

The grooving "One" from the 1978 album of the same name was eminently danceable and its conclusion signaled extra time when Jamal and his musicians took their bows to a standing ovation. The encores began with Billy Reid's "The Gypsy," a staple of Jamal's gigs in recent years. Its mixture of devilishly sharp orchestration and puckish comedy—with Badrena's vocal antics provoking Jamal's withering stares—lightened the mood. The title track of [After Fajr](#) (Dreyfus Records, 2005) was a dazzling 20-minute epic; with Riley and Badrena in a more supportive role. Jamal clearly reveled in the greater space, unleashing his most fluid and lyrical playing of the evening.

How much longer Jamal's creative flame can burn is hard to guess, but in the autumn of his extraordinary career he's still playing with a rare intensity and a passion that show few signs of abating.

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Another excellent review Ian!.... Good to know that AJ is still out and about.

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