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JazzVillage

- Ahmad Jamal: Biography *JazzVillage*



Critic Stanley Crouch cites Ahmad Jamal's impact on the fresh form in jazz as an outstanding conceptualist. Crouch considers Mr. Jamal's distinctive style as having had an influence on the same level as "Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, Count Basie, Thelonius Monk, Horace Silver and John Lewis, all thinkers whose wrestling with form and content influenced the shape and texture of the music, and whose ensembles were models of their music visions."

The hallmarks of Mr. Jamal's style are rhythmic innovations, colorful harmonic perceptions, especially left hand harmonic and melodic figures, plus parallel and contrary motion lines in and out of chordal substitutions and alterations and pedalpoint ostinato interludes in tasteful dynamics. He also incorporates a unique sense of space in his music, and his musical concepts are exciting without being loud in volume. Augmented by a selection of unusual standards and his own compositions, Mr. Jamal impressed and influenced, among others, trumpeter Miles Davis.

In 1951, Mr. Jamal first recorded Ahmad's Blues on Okeh Records. His arrangement of the folk tune Billy Boy, and Poinciana (not his original composition), also stem from this period. In 1955, he recorded his first Argo (Chess) Records album that included New Rhumba, Excerpts From The Blues, Medley (actually I Don't Want To Be Kissed), and It Ain't Necessarily So — all later utilized by Miles Davis and Gil Evans on the albums "Miles Ahead" and "Porgy and Bess." In his autobiography, Mr. Davis praises Mr. Jamal's special artistic qualities and cites his influence. In fact, the mid-to-late 1950's Miles Davis Quintet recordings notably feature material previously recorded by Mr. Jamal: Squeeze Me, It Could Happen To You, But Not For Me, Surrey With The Fringe On Top, Ahmad's Blues, On Green Dolphin Street and Billy Boy.

In 1956, Mr. Jamal, who had already been joined by bassist Israel Crosby in 1955, replaced guitarist Ray Crawford with a drummer. Working as the "house trio" at Chicago's Pershing Hotel drummer Vernell Fournier joined this trio in 1958 and Mr. Jamal made a live album for Argo Records entitled But Not For Me. The resulting hit single and album, that also included Poinciana — his rendition could be considered his "signature". This album remained on the Ten Best-selling charts for 108 weeks — unprecedented then for a jazz album. This financial success enabled Mr. Jamal to realize a dream, and he opened a restaurant/club, The Alhambra, in Chicago. Here the Trio was able to perform while limiting their touring schedule and Mr. Jamal was able to do record production and community work.

Mr. Jamal was born on July 2, 1930, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A child prodigy who began to play the piano at the age of 3, he began formal studies at age 7. While in high school, he completed the equivalent of college master classes under the noted African-American concert singer and teacher Mary Caldwell Dawson and pianist James Miller. He joined the musicians union at the age of 14, and he began touring upon graduation from Westinghouse High School at the age of 17, drawing critical acclaim for his solos. In 1950, he formed his first trio, The Three

Strings. Performing at New York's The Embers club, Record Producer John Hammond "discovered" The Three Strings and signed them to Okeh Records (a division of Columbia, now Sony Records).

In 1994, Mr. Jamal received the American Jazz Masters award from the National Endowment for the Arts. The same year he was named a Duke Ellington Fellow at Yale University, where he performed commissioned works the Assai String Quartet. A CD is available of these works.

