

Pianist Jamal's career is peaking like never before

by *George_Varga*

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AHMAD JAMAL - Ahmad Jamal has been one of the most eloquent and influential pianists in jazz for more than half a century, in large part because he has devoted so much of his time to nurturing his greatest passion. CNS Photo. "It's a paid vacation!" the bearded keyboard legend said with a chortle from France, where he recently completed a new album with his trio. But Jamal, who has been leading bands for 56 of his 77 years, works as hard as he plays. And he plays with such a unique combination of elegance and intensity - as well as with one of the most supple touches in jazz - that he puts many musicians half, or a third, his age to shame.

"My career is peaking like it hasn't ever peaked before; we are in more demand now than we were years ago," said Jamal, whose landmark 1958 live album, "At the Pershing," became the first jazz LP to sell a million copies.

Jamal's live performance contracts stipulate that he be provided with a digital electronic keyboard in his hotel rooms at each stop on his tours. His most recent trek took him from Portugal to England, then over to France for more concerts and a four-day recording session, followed by a tour-closing date in the northern French port city of Boulogne.

After returning to the United States, the Connecticut-based pianist and composer had only a few days off before flying to San Diego, where he opened a three-night, six-show engagement at Anthology. It was, he believes, his first San Diego performance since the 1970s.

"I don't do too many club dates," said Jamal, whose acclaimed engagement at Ronnie Scott's in November marked his first London club appearance in 35 years.

"But the offer from Anthology was attractive enough and they provide a hotel of my choice. (Bill Charlap Trio drummer) Kenny Washington described the venue and told me they have a wonderful piano."

"Wonderful piano" is an apt description of any keyboard Jamal plays. Like few others, he is blessed with a pinpoint command of his instrument and the ability to strike a fine balance between freedom and discipline, fire and finesse.

When Jamal performs, he makes the spaces between notes as important as the notes themselves. A master of dynamic control and of musical tension and release, he can create perfectly formed new compositions within any given piece to make his improvisations sound both surprising and completely logical. Able to craft arrangements that make a jazz trio sound almost orchestral, he is also one of those rare players who never runs out of intriguing musical ideas.

Or as esteemed saxophonist Cannonball Adderly once noted of Jamal: "He always gives the impression of having something in reserve. 'Don't shoot everything in one tune and play 50 choruses or it'll all sound the same,' he told me."

Miles Davis was an even bigger fan, writing in his autobiography: "(Ahmad) knocked me out with his concept of space, his lightness of touch, his understatement and the way he phrased notes and passages."

Davis not only asked some of the pianists in his own bands to play like Jamal, he asked one of his best drummers, Philly Joe Jones, to rhythmically emulate the accents Jamal's guitarist, Ray Crawford, played with his thumb. Davis also recorded Jamal's 1955 composition "New Rumba," and performed it in concert.

That the iconic trumpeter didn't thank Jamal personally for being such an inspiration never concerned the pianist, then or now.

"He didn't have to do that because actions speak louder than words," Jamal said. "He was quite a fan of mine and I accept that. I was a fan of his, too, so it worked both ways."

A proposed music project that would have teamed Jamal with Davis and Adderly was bandied about in the late-1950s. It never reached fruition.

"There was talk," Jamal recalled. "But we were all (band) leaders, so it was too complicated."

Jamal's current trio features his longtime bassist James Cammack and top New Orleans drummer Idris Muhammad, whose propulsive playing provides a fluid yet flexible foundation for ballads and up-tempo numbers alike.

The two are the latest in a long line of notable Jamal band members. It's a musical fraternity that dates back to guitarist Crawford and the redoubtable rhythm section of bassist Israel Crosby and drummer Vernell Fournier, who replaced Crawford in 1956.

"Richard Davis, the bassist, his first job was with me," Jamal noted proudly. "Art Davis also worked with me; I've had a host of wonderful musicians."

"What I look for is character, perception, understanding of the music, philosophically, and some ability to empathize with the leader. If you don't have character, you can't really perform up to a certain level."

Like saxophonist James Moody, with whom he did a concert tour of Thailand last December, Jamal does not record nearly as often as befits his legendary status. Yet, while his fans crave more releases from him, the veteran pianist prefers to bide his time.

"I don't go in the studio often," he acknowledged. "I haven't done anything for two or three years, which is my usual modus operandi. I don't go in the studio, willy-nilly to make an album; I never have. I don't go by deadlines, I go by inspiration."

For Jamal, the inspiration to play piano came at the age of 3, when an uncle challenged him to sit at the keyboard and try and replicate what the uncle had just played. Jamal did precisely that.

"Music chose me, I didn't choose it," he said. "At that age you don't make decisions, as such; decisions are made for you. So, I've been with the piano and the music scene ever since. I was doing professional work at 10. I joined the Musician's Union at 14, when the minimal age was 16.

"How? I just put my age up two years and didn't get found out." In his hometown, jazz was tops

Ask most jazz artists to cite their musical influences and they'll happily comply. But piano great Ahmad Jamal is one of the few to also credit an entire city, his Pennsylvania birthplace, as a key inspiration.

"I draw upon many eras of music and also from my hometown of Pittsburgh," he said. "It's one of the outstanding places in the world for musicians. I was selling papers to Billy Strayhorn's family when I was 7. Gene Kelly and Andy Warhol are also from Pittsburgh."

Here are three hometown jazz giants Jamal cited:

ARTIST: ERROLL GARNER

Legacy: A critical and commercial favorite, this pianist worked with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the mid-1940s before establishing himself as a solo star. A master of spontaneous composition, he is perhaps best remembered for his ballad "Misty." Garner, who died in 1977 at the age of 53, was also noted for his ability to make any style his own without being able to read music.

ARTIST: RAY BROWN

Legacy: Brown, who died in 2002 at the age of 75, remains a towering influence as a bassist, composer and bandleader. Like Garner, he also worked with Gillespie and Parker, then co-founded the Modern Jazz Quartet and married Ella Fitzgerald. Brown became an international star as a member of the Oscar Peterson Trio before becoming a band member in his own right. In addition to countless jazz credits, he also recorded on albums by Blondie, Elvis Costello, Elton John and Earth, Wind & Fire.

ARTIST: ART BLAKEY

Legacy: Arguably the greatest hard-bop drummer ever, Blakey came up playing alongside Parker and Miles Davis before he and pianist Horace Silver co-founded The Jazz Messengers in 1954. Silver soon struck out on his own and the tireless Blakey led countless editions of the Messengers until his death in 1990 at the age of 71. Apart from Davis, no other bandleader nurtured so many future jazz greats as Blakey, whose groups featured everyone from Lee Morgan, Keith Jarrett and Wayne Shorter to Wynton Marsalis and "Tonight Show" bandleader Kevin Eubanks.

Jamal: "Other artists from Pittsburgh include Earl Hines, Dodo Marmarosa, George Benson, Dakota Stanton, Kenny Clarke; the list goes on and on."

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