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INTRICACY & GROOVE: At Home With **Ahmad Jamal**

Jazz fans, or at least jazz fans who hit the clubs with any regularity, are probably used to seeing Ahmad Jamal looking regal at his instrument. There's a formal vibe to the great pianist's approach. He sits upright, his wrists are hung purposefully and his arms are cast in a way that sanctions a full spectrum of sound. A big chunk of Jamal's art is based on milking his music for all the dynamics possible, and his posture—like that of most imposing instrumentalists—helps the creativity by bolstering the power. Long story short, the guy's got a definite serious side.

So it's relatively revealing to spend time with the 79-year-old master when he's away from the instrument, and even more novel to catch him in the very relaxed atmosphere of the rural Massachusetts village that he calls home. Jamal was out doing a couple of errands before he was spotted ambling toward his front door from across the tiny village green. Though he had a stack of papers in his hand (business never truly leaves you alone, right?), he looked content with his surroundings. And why not? He's found some privacy—one of his longstanding wishes—living off the beaten path.

Surrounded by classic New England totems (tiny white post office, a few little shops, bare trees, rolling hills, babbling brook), Jamal exuded a sense of ease—like a guy who knew the answers to a lot of life's questions. The pressures of jazz clubs and concert halls were banished here. The sprawling home with the two Steinway grands and the waterfall looming just outside the picture window is a haven—one that the pianist appreciates more and more as his 80th birthday looms. So it's not a shock that he ignored the ringing of the phone while setting down some cider and cheese for his guest.

"I don't like to answer phones," he says while raising his eyebrows. "There are too many distractions in our lives, and I'm pretty happy when I'm at home. These days I'm doing exactly the right amount of work. I only perform on special occasions. The upcoming month of April is one special occasion. And I'm leaving tomorrow for a weekend at Yoshi's in San Francisco—I guess that's a special occasion as well." He chuckles at the end of his thought, but it's a Cheshire Cat grin—is he serious about only working occasionally? Itineraries show that he's had plenty of gigs around the world in the last few years, and lots of fans believe he's operating at his creative zenith these days.

One thing's for sure: After six-and-a-half decades of setting up shop

By Jim Macnie // Photography by Jimmy Katz

on bandstands around the world, Jamal has earned himself some breathing room. Jack DeJohnette, another global traveler and a guy who makes his home in the woods (which, as the crow flies, isn't that far from Jamal's getaway), knows how restorative rural living can be.

"Having some quiet around you definitely provides a chance to recharge," says the drummer. "Check the trees, birds, mountains—step back for a minute. And that seeps into the music, sure."

If that's the case, maybe you can take the title track from Jamal's new album as a lifestyle anthem. "A Quiet Time" opens with a riff-based surge of activity from the bandleader's small ensemble of piano, bass, drums and percussion, but immediately settles into a melody that sounds like a leaf falling from a branch. All the signature Jamal elements are in place: the exquisite touch, the profound grace, the mercurial improv choices. Though they've been there for decades—certainly since he made his first big career splash with *At The Pershing: But Not For Me*, the 1958 powerhouse that rode the charts for more than two years—these days everything about his playing is a bit sharper, a touch more vivid, a smidge more fanciful.

A Quiet Time is filled with audacious maneuvers. Frequent tempo changes, sudden melody switcheroos and unexpected flourishes are the norm. Some are feints that broaden the music's character—zigging one way while zagging another. Each is subtly accomplished, complementary to its predecessor while offering an individualistic perspective. Several are guided by a steely sense of control that has long been part of the pianist's artistic personality.

"Ahmad knows *exactly* what he's doing at every second," enthuses pianist Bill Charlap. "Yes, he improvises on the spot, but those [moves] have got absolutely nothing to do with chance. Without question, his playing has completely evolved throughout the years."

Check the YouTube video of a Jamal festival gig with George Coleman where the pianist conflates snippets of "Stolen Moments," "Midnight Sun" and "Fascinating Rhythm" while interspersing his references with free-floating abstractions. He smiles as each new notion comes into his head, and he smiles even more as he executes them. "What I try to do is stimulate thought processes," he told me in an inter-



view 20 years ago. “Playing at the optimum level is the challenge.”

Bob Zimmerman is a 69-year-old Bay Area jazz fan who caught Jamal at Yoshi’s a few nights after my Massachusetts visit. He’d wanted to see the pianist for years, but had never gotten around to it. He liked the hard-charging action he heard on the bandstand.

“I knew his style had changed from the ’50s,” Zimmerman said. “He used to play in a light swing mood, but he’s more aggressive and improvisational these days. The word I used to use is *avant garde*; that might not be right. Whatever you call it, the way he plays is the essence of what jazz is all about.”

“De-vel-op-ment,” whispered Jamal while sipping some cider in his kitchen, “where would we be without it? When I first heard the young Bud Powell, he was playing fluid, really fluid, a lot more like [Art] Tatum. It was different; not the same as we know him now. It’s all about de-vel-op-ment.”

Zimmerman had posted to one of the Jamal YouTube videos, talking about being at the Yoshi’s gig and mentioning the standing ovation the audience gave the bandleader. “It was great to see him live,” he said. “You get a real appreciation for his artistry. Sometimes [in jazz] that doesn’t come across on studio records.”

The most famous audience to see Jamal live was that crowd at the Pershing Hotel. Routinely cited as one of jazz’s classic records, *But Not For Me* was recorded in January of 1958, when the proud Pittsburgh native was 28, and Chicago was his home. Bassist Israel Crosby and drummer Vernel Fournier helped him make the magic.

“If you’re looking for an argument that pleasurable mainstream art can assume radical status at the same time, Jamal is your guide,” writes Ben Ratliff in an entry about the album in the *New York Times Essential Library* series. From the hard gallop of “Surrey With The Fringe On Top” to the pop melodicism of “Poinciana,” the three men bring an infectious elan to some rigorous musicianship.

“Ahmad’s challenge is to juggle the intricacy with the grooves,” says DeJohnette. “His music always has a groove. That’s something I can definitely relate to. Groove is a common denominator that brings people in, but it’s also a relief from the intricacy. Ahmad’s always doing a balancing act with that.”

“Everyone in the band is an arranger on that date,” says Charlap. “A trio is about three equal parts making a whole. I was 11 or 12 years old when I first heard it. The guys I was really aware of were Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson—both masters of the trio. When I heard Ahmad’s group, well ... it sounded like a completely modern point of view. He could be a big band at one moment, a small group at another, a singer at another. Every note means something.”

Pianist Randy Weston, four years Jamal’s senior, has a former retailer’s perspective on the



Pershing music. “When ‘Poinciana’ came out, I was managing a record store on 125th Street. We played the record in the shop all the time. People would stop in their tracks. It has feeling, a spirit. Fournier with that New Orleans beat, and Ahmad with that natural swing. We sold cases of that thing. In other words, I was selling Ahmad’s records before I even met him.”

Part of the pianist’s narrative is the fact that he was sage on the instrument as a tyke. As a 3-year-old, his uncle asked him to repeat some piano phrases, and it turned out the kid had no problem doing so. From there it was lots of lessons, lots of raised eyebrows, and a leap into the deep end with Liszt etudes and other high water marks of the classical canon. There was a poignant exchange in Jamal’s kitchen when he was asked to recall those baby days.

Can you still see the room and the piano in your mind’s eye now?

“As clear as day,” he responds. “I can see the upright my mother had in the house. I can see my uncle Lawrence asking me, ‘Can you play this?’ Of course, I was only 3. But I played every note.”

How did it come about? Was he goading you or fooling around?

“He was just having fun with a kid: ‘I bet you can’t do this.’ He was my mom’s brother-in-law. In-laws were like blood relatives to us. On one visit he decided to tease me a bit, never dreaming that it would be a catalyst to me playing to sell-out crowds at La Salle Pleyel in Paris and having one of the most successful instrumental recordings in history.”

Did you ever run away from the piano? Were you ever looking out the window thinking, I wish I was out there with my friends? Or were you wildly dedicated?

“Of course I thought about playing baseball

and running around—doing what all the other kids were doing. But I was more involved in music. I kept going to Apple Avenue to my teacher’s house, taking my weekly lessons, and eventually playing with the older guys around town. Those ‘baby days’ were gone quick. George Hudson made me leave my happy home at 17 years old. Ha! I went straight from infancy to adulthood. I was always serious. If you see that classic video [from *The Sound of Jazz* show] with Ben Webster, Hank Jones, Papa Jo and them hanging around the piano, you know I was serious.”

So there wasn’t that much time for kid stuff?

“I did plenty of *adult* stuff. I was leading a group at 21, and it’s a big responsibility to keep men working. On the road at 17, started my own group in 1951—that’s adult stuff, OK? I grew up quick.”

But you’re also a guy with an easy laugh.

“Well, now I am! I should be able to have an easy laugh at 79, right? But it took me a long time, and it’s a careful laugh, careful. This life is nothing to play with. You can’t take it for granted. Savor every moment. I was 29 on that video clip; I’m 79 now. Let me tell ya [*snaps his fingers*], it went like that.”

Jamal’s acclaim may stem from his three-piece recordings (the term “trio” is not part of his vernacular; he prefers to call the bulk of his work “small ensemble” pieces), but he’s made records with George Coleman’s tenor and Ray Kennedy’s violin joining the crew, and recently percussionist Manolo Badrena has become part of the extended family. A year-and-a-half ago, he was front and center for a Jazz at Lincoln Center celebration that found nuggets from his songbook rearranged for large ensemble. Seems like the one format he’s dodged to some degree—at least as far as the recording studio goes—is the solo realm. He’s quick to

remind that zealots will recall that he did a solo stint at the Palm Tavern in Chicago during early '50s.

I encourage him to describe what was going on there. What was it like?

"What was going on there was the rent," comes the answer. "I was there because of the bills. I was paying \$7 a week for a room, and I had to make a living. Eventually I started making \$32 per week at one of the big department stores. I was making kitchen cabinets for 80 cents an hour before I got my card transferred from Pittsburgh to Chicago—it took a while. So

it wasn't a meteoric rise for Mr. Jamal. I paid my dues."

The pianist does admit to enjoying his solo sessions these days, however. He says he's happiest when he has uninterrupted time to spend with the two regal Steinways that are always beckoning from his oversized music room. It's a rustic, barn-like space jutting off from the main house, and the walls are covered with been-there, done-that memorabilia: posters, newspaper clippings, award citations and such. He considers it a sanctuary of sorts, and is often in there working on ideas and honing his chops. When I

ask him if he'd run through some of the Liszt etudes that were part of his earliest schooling in that Pittsburgh parlor, he doesn't have to think long about the answer.

"I've got two words for you: 'Im-Possible.' Not going to happen." Then a smile takes over his face. "You'll hear my [solo] recordings one of these days. I have a sound engineer, and he set me up in [the piano room]. I take my time. My schedule is interesting. You never know when I'll go to that room. When I think I have something meaningful enough, I'll punch it [into the recorder], and I'll come out with it."

There's one fan who'd like to hear Jamal sans ensemble. "Ahmad's a spontaneous composer," says DeJohnette. "He once came to my house, immediately sat at the piano and started to play. 'What tune is that?' I asked him. And he said, 'Oh, man, that's nothing. I'm just messing around.' But it came out arranged, with really advanced moves both rhythmically and harmonically. Now, he's not the only person who can do that, but he does it to such a high level that there's a personal stamp put on it. You immediately know it's him.

"I think he *should* do some solo concerts—he's amazing on that level. There's a lot of pressure with that, but the results can be great. Keith [Jarrett] certainly knows about that. You don't have to wait on the drummer or bassist; you create the atmosphere yourself. If you're in the right frame of mind, it's rewarding."

Jamal isn't hazy on the challenges of working alone. "Everybody's not Art Tatum," he says bluntly. "That's all I can tell you. But I don't worry about it. Just playing solo for the sake of playing solo means nothing to me. We all have different fingerprints. Some of us sit comfortably with that role of the soloist, and some of us are much better ensemble players. Horace Silver, for example: ensemble player and ensemble writer—one of the most gifted out there. Did you ever see Horace play solo? I don't think so. He played solo *at home*. We have to do what we're comfortable with. I don't solicit soundtracks—Quincy Jones does that, Johnny Mandel does that. Don't get much better than Quincy Jones and Johnny Mandel, right? You got to do what's best for you."

The small ensemble action of *A Quiet Time* sure sounds like it might be best for our hero. Bassist James Cammack and percussionist Badrena are on board; so is drummer Kenny Washington, a newcomer to the Jamal fold. "I wouldn't even begin to guess what Kenny might bring to the table," says Washington's longtime bandmate Charlap. "He's a great artist and he'll embrace what he's surrounded by, but something tells me Ahmad is full of surprises."

Jamal says he wasn't quite ready to record, but thought the timing might be right after the success of 2008's *It's Magic*. And back to that nature vibe—Badrena has a few ways of generating chirping birds and marsh peepers in "Paris

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After Dark” and “The Love Is Lost.” The boss says he likes that kind ingenuity, and digs what the two drummers do together. “We rehearsed and it felt right,” Jamal says. “When I go in the studio, it’s to make a good record; I think this is one of ‘em.”

DeJohnette was playing the disc the day we chatted. “I know why Ahmad uses Manolo,” he says. “It’s because he listens, he’s musical and he puts things in places where they make sense. Kenny works well, too. He pushes when necessary, and is calm when it’s needed. Those two really complement each other.”

One of the record’s zeniths is Weston’s wonderful “Hi-Fly.” Jamal has played it for years, but says this performance finally brought it to an “acceptable” level. “Randy is one of the great writers in our community, no question,” assures Jamal. “Great pianist, of course, but a great writer, too. I hope he likes what we’ve done.” Jamal blocks and tinkles while his rhythm section glides; thanks to what saxophonist Ted Nash calls the pianist’s “profound clarity,” it’s impossible not to follow his every move. “Hi-Fly” comes alive anew.

“I haven’t heard it yet, no,” laughs Weston. “But I know it’s cool. If it’s Ahmad, it’s going to be cool. Anytime you go to see him, you see all the other pianists sitting in the audience. They’re all getting a lesson. Ahmad’s our royalty.”

Jamal mentioned that work-wise, April 2010 will be one of his “special occasions.” It’s then that he returns to his beloved birthplace to play his large ensemble music. He says it will be similar to the Lincoln Center show he commandeered back in September of 2008, a presentation by his small ensemble followed by a big band romping through his canon. Jamal was impressed by the New York event’s musicianship; one of the more animated tunes on *A Quiet Time* is entitled “After JALC.” Predictably, it’s unpredictable, steadily amending its mood in a fetching contour that accounts for bouncy swing and recital hall flourishes. Nash, a longtime member of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, says that show’s personality was a little different than most.

“There was a certain kind of excitement about playing with him that I haven’t actually seen before,” Nash says. “I noticed that when everyone got up to play it was like, ‘Man, I want this to be special, this cat’s a bad motherfucker.’ He was surrounded by the big band, with all sorts of people who wanted to solo. He could have been, ‘Well, I want this to be a background for me, so I can shine.’ But you could tell that wasn’t his motive. His motive was to have fun, make music and hear everyone else play—basically create an environment where everyone felt like playing.

“The way he comped wasn’t the generic way that lots of pianists play with chords in the middle of the keyboard, just filling things up. He gave lots of single line responses. He’d come back and throw things out at you, directly from

what you played. It was really interesting because it made you stop, and allowed him to respond, and then you felt like playing something else—that’s something I don’t feel with a lot of piano players. It’s really quite engaging. I guess that’s another reason people focus in on him. He makes them hone in.”

“The Aftermath,” “Should I” and “Devil’s In My Den” were all part of the program. Jamal, who eschews the word “jazz” in favor of the phrase “American classical music,” says he’s always tickled to be surrounded by that amount of action, but it’s not put together easily.

“Lotta work,” he sighs, “lotta work. But great musicians, one of the finest ensembles on Earth. What a correct place Wynton Marsalis has made for the music. It demonstrates how it should be housed. We played Marciac [a jazz festival in France] together, and I went back to see his show. We had a great time. The guys that work with him: spectacular. So I wrote “After JALC.”

And what does he hear in that music?

“Everything,” he says proudly. Almost on cue the phone rings again. “But I would like to hear some more. That’s what we’re always shooting for: just a little bit more.” **DB**

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