

Ahmad Jamal - Biography

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, Theolonius 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."

Considering his trio "an orchestra", Mr. Jamal not only achieves a unified sound, but subtly inserts independent roles for the bass and drums. 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. Like Louis Armstrong, Mr. Jamal is an exemplary ensemble player -- listening while playing and responding, thus inspiring his musicians to surpass themselves. Audiences delight in Mr. Jamal's total command of the keyboard, his charismatic swing and daringly inventive solos that always tell a story.

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).

Mr. Jamal has continued to record his outstanding original arrangements of such standards as I Love Your, A Time For Love, On Green Dolphin Street (well before Miles Davis!), End of a Love Affair, to cite a few. Mr. Jamal's own classic compositions begin with Ahmad's Blues (first recorded on October 25, 1951!), New Rhumba, Manhattan Reflections, Tranquility, Extensions, The Awakening, Night Mist Blues and most recently If I Find You Again, among many others.

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.

In 1970, Mr. Jamal performed the title tune by Johnny Mandel for the soundtrack of the film *Mash!*; and in 1995, two tracks from his hit album *But Not For Me -- Music, Music, Music*, and *Poinciana* -- were featured in the Clint Eastwood film *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Mr. Jamal's CD entitled *The Essence* features tenor saxophonist George Coleman -- Mr. Jamal's first recording made with a horn! Critical acclaim and outstanding sales resulted in two prestigious awards: *D'jango D'or* (critics) and *Cloch* (pronounced "shock" -- for sales) in France. Its success generated a concert at Salle Pleyel (equivalent to Carnegie Hall), and a CD has been released *Ahmad Jamal a Paris* (1992) and a second "live" concert by Mr. Jamal in 1996 under the same title, unissued except in France and available on the Dreyfus Records on the Internet, Mr. Jamal rightly considers one of his best recordings. Ahmad Jamal's 70th Birthday "live" concert recording *Olympia 2000*, is known as *The Essence Part III*. *The Essence, Part II*, featured Donald Byrd on the title track, and on his CD entitled *Nature*, Stanley Turrentine is featured on *The Devil's In My Den*, and steel drummer Othello Molineaux augments the trio format. Continuing his recording career, Mr. Jamal released *In Search of* on CD, and his first DVD *Live In Baalbeck*.

For students of the piano, Hal Leonard Publications has published *The Ahmad Jamal Collection* of a collection of piano transcriptions. Mr. Jamal continues to record exclusively for the French Birdology label, and his albums are released on Verve and Atlantic in the United States.

Mr. Jamal is an exclusive Steinway piano artist.