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Ahmad Jamal's Piano Solo on 'Saturday Morning (Reprise)'

Pianist Ahmad Jamal is currently in his nineties, and he's still playing. With a discography spanning all the way back to the 1950s, it's inspiring to see he's still at it. We're going to be examining Jamal's solo on "Saturday Morning (Reprise)" from his 2013 album *Saturday Morning* (Jazz Village).

This improvisation is a study in understatement. First, it's remarkably short for a jazz solo. Sixteen bars and done? Who does that?

Second, notice how comfortable Jamal is with not playing. Bars 9, 14 and 16 have nothing in them from the piano. Measures 7 and 11 are almost empty. Not having the need to fill space and the composure to allow the rhythm

section to groove through is considered by some to be a sign of musical maturity. It also can be heard as adding weight to what he does play, just like the quiet person who when they finally speak everyone takes notice.

Additionally, his left hand is used so sparingly. There's what might be a short jab supporting the melody in measure 2, though it may be played by the right hand, and then we hear nothing else from the left hand until bar 8. Bars 11–13 have the most we've heard of the left hand, but in 12–13 it's just one note (the slur at the end of 13 could be the left or right hand, or a combination. It really doesn't matter, we're still left with a lack of any counter-

point or accompaniment.)

Then there's the development of his first seven measures: Jamal starts out with an ascending chromatic idea from tonic to third, and tagging that with some mixolydian stuff (mostly descending). He then explores this idea over the next five bars, creating variations, such as displacing it forward a beat (starting the motif on beat 1 rather than 2), truncating it to a one bar phrase for measures 3, 4 and 5, and in the final two iterations not playing the entire chromatic sequence, and altering how he plays the tag. It's wonderful to hear this idea explored in depth, but also note that Jamal devotes almost half his improvisa-

♩ = 92 D \flat

1:53

5

9

13

tion to this lick. That's commitment to an idea.

And continuing with that commitment, check out his last lick, where Jamal uses the same chromatic idea, but ascending from third to fifth instead (measure 15). He also varies it by inserting the major seventh between most of the notes, and he starts this phrase on beat 2 again, which was how he'd first introduced us to this motif (and we haven't heard since measure 1). Referencing the opening, but not restating it, it creates a sense of return but without a full-out recapitulation.

And while we're discussing the seventh: that's another intriguing thing about Jamal's improvisation. The vamp is built off a D \flat chord, but is it D \flat maj7 or D \flat 7? In the opening five bars we have some C flats, suggesting D \flat 7, but then they completely go away until bar 11 (creating more of a D \flat 6, or major pentatonic sound). But at the end of this solo we have all those C naturals (bars 13, 15), suggesting D \flat maj7. Between these we have measure 12, where Jamal plays both (the C \flat , notated as B natural here), even letting them sustain into one another. It appears as if he's not hearing it

as either D \flat 7 or D \flat maj7, but as a D \flat that he can mold into either (or neither, or both) as fits his expression. It's also helpful that the bass isn't defining it as either chord. Was this discussed among the band beforehand or did it occur spontaneously during the improvisation?

Something that I often point out in this column is how musicians will use the range of their instruments. For seven bars, Jamal restricts himself to one octave. At measure 8 (the midpoint of his solo) his range expands in two ways. The melody moves up an octave, and the left hand is added an octave down (starting out doubling the top line, making this enlargement of range quite obvious). The following melody lick (measure 10) and left-hand chord (measure 11) remain in those octaves, but in bars 12–15 he brings it back almost to within where he started. It's curious that he plays the E \flat in the upper part that is a step above his initial octave and the C in the lower part that is a step below, so just outside the beginning parameters.

More subtle: Jamal's phrase endings. That beginning motif landed on the tonic, but as

he explored this idea he changed the arrival point (the seventh in bars 3 and 5, the fifth in 4 and 7). All basically chord tones (let's not start the major seventh vs. flat seventh argument again). Though he deviates from this motif, the phrase endings are still chord tones: root in bar 8, third in bar 10 and then the fifth for the final resolution in measure 15.

Did you notice I skipped one? The phrase in measure 13 ends on an F \flat . This is totally fine on the D \flat chord, as playing a minor third on a major chord is a common blues sound, but it's usually combined with a dominant chord, producing a 7(#9) vibe. Here Jamal is running from the major seventh up to the #9 (minor third). This makes the F \flat sound a bit more "out" to my ear. I think it makes for a nice flow that after exploring landing on chords tones, Jamal's penultimate phrase resolves to a tension, making the ending sound more final.

DB

Jimi Durso is a guitarist and bassist based in the New York area. He recently released an album of Indian classical music played on the string bass, titled *Border Of Hiranyaloka*. Find out more at jimidurso.bandcamp.com.