

FALL PREVIEW

A Pair of Ahmad Jamal Live Albums Capture an Innovator in His Prime

The pianist, 92, has been hesitant to glance back: “I’m still evolving, whenever I sit down at the piano.”



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Published Aug. 31, 2022 Updated Sept. 8, 2022

The first time Ahmad Jamal put out a live recording with his trio, it was an unexpected smash. “At the Pershing: But Not for Me,” from 1958, became one of the best-selling instrumental records of its time. Since then, in an extraordinary career spanning more than 75 years, this piano eminence has released dozens more live albums, a catalog sprinkled with gems.

But what about the concerts he played that were captured on tape but never released? Ask him about digging those up for archival release, and he’ll almost certainly say “no, thanks.” Even at 92, Jamal resists glancing back. “I’m still evolving, whenever I sit down at the piano,” he said one recent afternoon, speaking by phone from his home in the Berkshires. “I still come up with some fresh ideas.”

So when he got wind of a set of pristine old recordings, captured in the mid-to-late 1960s during performances at the Penthouse club in Seattle, he hesitated. It took some cajoling for Jamal to sign off on a release. Eventually, “I went along with it,” he said. “But it’s unusual for me.”

His reluctance was thawed by Zev Feldman, the skillful and enthusiastic producer who unearthed the tapes, and by the quality of the performances themselves. Culled from half-hour radio broadcasts that had been caught on the Penthouse’s reel-to-reel tape machine, these recordings will see the light of day starting in November, with the release of two separate double-disc collections: “Emerald City Nights: Live at the Penthouse (1963-64)” and “(1965-66),” the first albums to arrive on Feldman’s new label, Jazz Detective. A third set, “(1966-68),” will be released soon after.

Five-and-a-half hours of music in all, the albums arriving in November are a celebration of both the flexibility and the certitude of Jamal’s style — a modernist marvel, and nearly a genre unto itself. His music can sometimes scan as easygoing acoustic jazz with catchy hooks, which explains its broad appeal. But really it’s packed with combustive overlays of rhythm — and a connection to musical history so deep and expansive that, in fact, it foresaw the future.

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“I think when he was creating those grooves that became iconic, he was finding another way: It left funk music, it left soul music, it left jazz,” said the pianist Jason Moran, who as the Kennedy Center’s artistic director for jazz has presented Jamal multiple times in recent years. “He was phrasing for the future. He wasn’t just phrasing for the ’60s, he was phrasing for the ’90s.”



The “Emerald City Nights” albums come from the period when Jamal had just returned to touring, and his piano playing was growing more lush. Don Bronstein

Jamal’s music with his trio — and then, in later years, a quartet with a hand percussionist added to the mix — reaches into a deep reserve of Black rhythmic practices, even as he wears the influence of Romantic piano music on his sleeve. In the process, as far back as the early 1950s he was sounding out grooves and feelings that would not catch on broadly until years later.

Plenty has been made of his influence on Miles Davis, who declared Jamal his favorite piano player. But it goes beyond that. Before James Brown had helped invent funk, Jamal was rearranging the organization of time in jazz, adding a heavier emphasis on the downbeat — like Brown eventually would — and syncopating the heck out of the rest of the measure, as an Afro-Cuban musician might.

“There are things that occur in your sound that you’ll never be able to trace, because they go too far back. And I feel like he is totally aware of that ancestral rhythmic connection,” Moran said. “Ahmad on the piano is one of the rare ones that figured out that sensibility that was gluing together so many decades, in the past and the future.”

It’s little wonder that he became one of the most sampled musicians in hip-hop history. Jamal’s piano phrasing haunts iconic tracks like Nas’s “The World Is Yours” (the producer Pete Rock sampled his “I Love Music,” from 1970) and De La Soul’s “Stakes Is High” (J Dilla plucked a few bars from Jamal’s “Swahililand,” from 1974).

He first sidled up to a piano at age 3, the year Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as president of the United States. He’s been playing ever since. At that time, when pianists still played the role that jukeboxes would soon take over, Pittsburgh was turning out future jazz stars as reliably as it was generating steel. Jamal was preceded at Westinghouse High School by Erroll Garner, Mary Lou Williams and Dodo Marmarosa — all future piano greats. The city was also full of Western classical music, a tradition Jamal learned from his piano teacher, Mary Cardwell Dawson, who would later found the National Negro Opera Company.

“In Pittsburgh, we didn’t study just the American classical music, also sometimes referred to as jazz,” he said. (Jamal has always rejected the word “jazz,” calling it both imprecise and racially insensitive.) “We studied European classical music, and Duke Ellington, along with others. So that’s the difference.”

He joined the local musicians’ union at 14, and headed out on tour three years later with the George Hudson Orchestra. While playing in Detroit, he was exposed to the growing Ahmadiyya Muslim movement. He converted and began studying Islam intensely — something that he credits with saving him from the snares of life on the road. It also fortified his conviction to abide by his own code.

“I always tried to divest myself of the music business. I wasn’t too thrilled with the music business at any time,” he said. “So I have always sought to do other things.”

Soon Jamal began traveling to Africa, and he began what he says was the first company to import greeting cards from Africa to the United States. (His first mention in *The New York Times*, from 1959, is in an article titled “Pianist-Investor Is a Hit in Cairo.”) He also briefly ran a music venue, the Alhambra, in Chicago, where he was living in the 1950s. And for a time he stopped performing publicly altogether, focusing instead on running a series of small record labels that put out LPs by musicians on both sides of the Atlantic.

The “Emerald City Nights” albums come from the period when Jamal had just returned to touring, and his piano playing — always centered on finely wrought patterns and spare, interwoven phrases — was growing more lush. The Penthouse was one of his favorite clubs to play, so the new collections showcase Jamal in a number of different engagements, with a variety of trio lineups.

The tracks include Jamal originals like “Minor Moods”; contributions from his bandmates; jazz standards by Cole Porter and Benny Golson; and pop ditties like “Feeling Good,” performed here just months before Nina Simone’s famous rendition was released. On “(1965-66),” one side features a particularly exciting (and rarely recorded) lineup: the drummer Vernel Fournier, whose famous beat had set the gamboling foundation for “Poinciana,” and the bassist Jamil Nasser, one of Jamal’s most consistent collaborators in the 1960s and ’70s.

“He supervised every part of this production: listening to the music, ID-ing the tracks,” Feldman said of Jamal’s involvement in the archival release.

“There are a few things that didn’t make it,” Feldman conceded. Then, with an artful touch of understatement, he explained: “He has a discerning ear.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 72 of the New York edition with the headline: An Innovator Caught Live in His Prime