

Ahmad Jamal Interview 16 November 2011

Q: After some great albums for the Dreyfus label [Francis Dreyfus had died in 2010], you have moved to Harmonia Mundi's Jazz Village label, so how did this new deal come about?

AJ: It came about through Seydou Barry, an associate of mine, he is the first man to bring me to Marseilles, he arranged that session.

Q: A lot of thought goes into an Ahmad Jamal album, so how did you conceptualise *Blue Moon*?

AJ: Well, *Blue Moon* is an interesting project, it turned out much better than I anticipated. I think it is going to be received very well, I think it's going to be of the calibre of 628 [Argo LP-628 *But Not For Me: At the Pershing*], my million seller that I did for Chess Records, sometime back. [In the event *Blue Moon* received a Grammy nomination] It's comparable to that quality-wise, in fact, I think it is going to make on the recording industry. We need a shot and this is a shot for me, I'm with some brilliant musicians, as was the case with Vernel Fournier and Israel Crosby, so I have some brilliant musicians on this as well, Reginald Veal, on bass, Herlin Riley on drums and one of the great percussionists, Manolo Badrena, who was with Joe Zawinul's Weather Report, so this is a very well thought out project

Q: Well the song 'Blue Moon' is a lovely standard, its been around a while, as long as you, dare I say, since the 1930s if memory serves, so what was your approach to it?

AJ: My approach was like I always do — I have ideas that are catalysts for arrangements and I had an idea at home playing on one of my Steinways, I have two at home, and this particular time I was playing a line that was dictated by 'Blue Moon', so I wrote this bass line, and it starts the whole thing off [of an arrangement of the tune]. There is no such thing as 'old music,' it's either good or bad, so compared to Mozart, 'Blue Moon' is very young and there are thousands of kids trying to learn Mozart right now! There have been a lot of interpretations of 'Blue Moon,' mine is perhaps the newest approach to this composition. First of all I had to live the composition before I recorded it, which was Nat Cole's approach, I believe he lived with a song for a while before he recorded it, and this concept of mine has developed over a period. As it happens I have known 'Blue Moon' for years and I developed the arrangement at home, and of course most of my arrangements — I have been writing since I was ten years old — when I hear something I think is valid I commit to paper. There's a lot of things a musician, whether he be Mozart or Mr. Jamal, we don't commit to paper, but this arrangement I wrote and it came out very well.

Q: Perhaps you could talk us through some of the tracks

AJ: 'Autumn Rain' is mine, it opens with 'Autumn Rain,' which I wrote some time ago, and I have one which I also put on the promotional package, 'I Remember Italy,' that is very interesting to me, it's a sectional

piece, one of mine, and there is a beautiful read on 'Laura,' one of my favourite compositions. There's an interesting piece from the musical *Golden Boy* — a lot of people have forgotten the history of *Golden Boy* [a musical about an interracial romance and racial equality] — starring Sammy Davis and his co-star Paula Shelley, 'This Is the Life.'

Q: You mentioned Vernel Fournier and Israel Crosby and as you know Mosaic released all your Argo material between 1956 and 1962 — a very exciting set. Miles Davis was a fan of that material, he said he couldn't wait until your next album came out, so were you aware the extent to which he was listening to what you were doing at that time?

AJ: He recorded one of my compositions, 'New Rhumba,' and he recorded 'Ahmad's Blues' as well...

Q: And your arrangement of 'Billy Boy'

AJ: Well that's been plagiarised all over the place [laughs], a lot of pianists took that public domain composition, and I didn't copyright the arrangement, I should have! A lot people have recorded that, including Miles Davis' Red Garland with Miles Davis [on the album *Milestones* in 1958 and on his own album *Red Garland Revisited* in 1969], he also did 'Ahmad's Blues' with Red Garland [The Miles Davis Quintet *Workin'* from 1956].

Q: What interests me is from that time the way you extended the form of arrangements, if I can put it that way, opening them up with an *ostinato*

or vamp, sometimes with a new rhythm under it, which was pretty influential

AJ: Well, I'm from Pittsburgh and we have a host of people who come up with different approaches to music, Billy Strayhorn being one of them, Ray Brown being another, Erroll Garner. Earl Hines, Roy Eldridge, Art Blakey, Kenny Clarke, all from Pittsburgh, Stanley Turrentine, and many others. So all of us are different, we are very stylistic, very different – George Benson is from Pittsburgh – I can go on and on and on, Gene Kelly, who is innovative when it came to dancing, we are a group musicians and dancers and composers that I think have made an impact in their field, it still goes on, there's still many that have stayed there, so that approach is from my home town of Pittsburgh.

Q: This idea of this freedom within form – the way you broke open the form of 'Autumn Leaves' on *Portfolio of Ahmad Jamal* – can you talk about that relationship you enjoyed with Vernel Fournier and Israel Crosby because they followed you in a heartbeat when you moved away from the song's form on this and others were you used the same technique

AJ: It's not so much space and whatever, which is usually described as 'my approach', but my approach is one of discipline, I am a disciplinarian, there has to be discipline in music. In fact, I have been working in all sorts of formats for years and years and years, I have worked with bass and just a tenor saxophone and piano – a lot of people don't know I have worked with big orchestras, small orchestras, every compliment known and unknown to man! My approach is one of discipline, that's what you

hear in my music. Working with Vernel Fournier and Israel Crosby – I was Israel Crosby's pianist first and I eventually got him to be my bassist, but he was very busy with Benny Goodman, and so was Vernel Fournier – very busy, I mean, not with Benny Goodman but with other people – so I finally got that ensemble together, with Israel Crosby and Vernel Fournier, and the result is that it was nothing short of miraculous. They were great musicians and when I disbanded, George Shearing got Israel *and* Vernel to join him [see The George Shearing Trio *Jazz Moments*], they were very important musicians, very important.

Q: They seemed to follow your improvisations wherever you decided to take them

AJ: Many, many times I would start a song in the middle of a composition, not necessarily start at the top, I attempted to develop my own forms, and that's what you hear, and you have to get a certain type of musician to understand what I'm doing, and what I attempt to do – it demands a special craftsman for what we do, no question about that. My approach is what you hear

Q: Your trio with Ray Crawford often get overlooked these days, so can you speak about that

AJ: Ray Crawford, well, that's another dynamic there – he was the first man to get a percussion effect on the frets of his guitar and a lot of people thought I had a percussionist with me, but Ray was doing that on the frets of his guitar, which was emulated and copied and plagiarised quite a bit. I

have had very innovative guys with me through the years, and Ray was one of them – he is also a man from Pittsburgh!

Q: Perhaps you could reflect on your early records before Chess with Ray Crawford on guitar...

AJ: I was with Okeh, which was a subsidiary of Columbia, and then I went with Epic, which was another subsidiary of Columbia, from there from Parrot Records and Leonard Chess bought the masters from a guy named Al Benson and the rest is history. But my first records were with Okeh, then I went from Chess to Impulse! I moved to New York and one of my agents did a deal with Impulse! and we did some things with Ed Michel, who was producing there – a great producer, he did the things with John Coltrane and all Impulse! American classic music sessions were done by Ed Michel I believe.

Q: Live at Oil Can Charlie's?

AJ: I think John Heard is on bass, I was going through a major transition when that was recorded — I don't want to talk about it — but I certainly remember the recording session.

Q: Jazz piano has gone through a lot of transitions, yet you have managed to tread your own sense of artistic identity

AJ: It's been a natural process, one that is still developing, I am discovering every day music and the different colours and dynamics and

the different ways of exploring chordal structure, I'm still discovering every day, I tread my own path, its been a natural development, nothing that I force upon myself, I'm still discovering things — music is discovery, we don't create, no-one can create, but we can discover. We can't create a fly or a gnat, that's why there is that expression 'There is nothing new under the sun,' but if we're in tune with certain elements, we can discover so I am still discovering...

Q: ...American Classical Music

AJ: That's what it is, there's a feminist movement that have dictated that we say 'Chairperson' not 'Chairman,' so I think this is the appropriate name for what we have done. There are only two art forms that have developed in the United States, the Indian art, which is still not recognised as it should be, and this thing called jazz. We are people who have to be multi-dimensional in what we do — Dave Brubeck, Ahmad Jamal, all these people, George Shearing, Duke Ellington — these guys did not call themselves jazz musicians, John Coltrane didn't call himself a jazz musician. I am not paranoid about the word jazz, but the term jazz, if you look it up in a dictionary, is defined in many ways, and not necessarily in music. You can please yourself what you call jazz, and sometimes it has nothing to do with music. What we have done is sophisticated a very unsophisticated word, people say I play classical music, but what they have done is studied a European body of work, that's European classical music, and these are people I grew up listening to, Art Tatum, Lester Young, they were classicists, as far as I am concerned, and that's what this music is, American Classical Music, and I have a lot people who are

copying, we coined that phrase years and years ago, a lot of media, a lot of radio personalities, a lot of magazines, they're using 'American Classical Music', they're adopting that term, but it's up to the practitioner to call a spade a spade. If I was a doctor, I would be entitled to call myself a thoracic surgeon, or a nose specialist or an eye specialist, so I think it's up to the musician to redefine what I think is an ill defined platform. When you hear someone say I play classical music, as opposed to playing jazz, that's ridiculous. I was playing Franz Liszt when I was ten years old in competition, what I am saying is that I have studied two bodies of work, the European body of work, which is European classical music, and I have studied the American body of work, which is American classical music, simple as that – or as complicated as that, whatever you wish!

Q: Can you talk a little about transferability of skills from classical music to jazz

AJ: In Pittsburgh — I have to go back to Pittsburgh all the time — in Pittsburgh we didn't have those separations of forms, we studied all the forms in Pittsburgh, we studied Mozart, we studied Art Tatum, we studied Earl Hines, we studied Duke Ellington, we studied Beethoven. We didn't have that difference, all we recognised is good as opposed to what is not acceptable, and that's what developed the core elite musicians we have known all these years, because we didn't have those separations of various types of music – we studied it all.

Q: When did you feel that these various inputs were producing something you could recognise as your own

AJ: Everything depends on the knowledge one possesses, and if you limit yourself life-wise, you're going to come up with a limited approach to everything. You have to acquire as much knowledge as you can. It's a pre-requisite for music students, I tell them to listen to Art Tatum's 'Flying Home' with Slam Stewart and Tiny Grimes, that's what I tell students, if you want to study this music a pre-requisite should be, in my opinion, listening to Art Tatum's 'Flying Home,' so everything depends on knowledge one possesses. Coming up I listened to Ravel, I listened to Debussy, I listened to Art Tatum, I listened to as much as I could, and that's what shapes a musician – past, present and future. It is exposure to this great body of work we have that was born in America and was born in Europe

Q: Returning to the 1950s, Miles Davis was listening very carefully to what you were doing, were you aware of this at the time?

AJ: No, I wasn't aware, but it was a mutual admiration society, after I moved to New York, Miles lived a couple of blocks over but we never hung out together, but we had a mutual respect and that's what it is all about. Miles was a very historic figure and he studied my music and performed some of my songs and I certainly listened to Miles, but we didn't hang out together. I was aware of the fact that he was going to record 'Blue Rumba' [on *Miles Ahead*] because I had to issue the licence for it, but I wasn't aware that he was studiously 'watching what I was doing', that would be a bit presumptuous to say the least.

Q: Your trio with Israel Crosby and Vernel Fournier, to many people is one of the classic trios in jazz history. Were you aware how you were making history at the time

AJ: I like to look forward not backwards and I don't reflect on what contributions I made, but I know what we had and I admire what we had

Q: You mentioned you were once in a period of transition, what did that actually mean in your life?

AJ: All artists go through a period of transition, there was a period of time when Miles Davis for example, he didn't work for a number of years. Thelonious Monk closed the door and never appeared again, I think all of us go through transitory periods in our lives. It has to do with growth, reflection, it has to do with how we live, how we choose to live and I think all of us go through periods of transition

Q: When you emerged again your playing had tremendous energy which you have managed to retain

AJ: It's called growth, that's what it is, its growing and continuing to grow and that's the great thing about discovery, my life is very interesting that's why I continue to discover. When I am working at home, which is my favourite venue, staying home! Once in a while I come out to do special things, but discovery is the name of the game and that's what you hear, you hear growth as opposed to what you may have done years and

years ago, and its very important you continue to discover — that's the key word, discovery

Q: And what would you say were the most important moments you experienced in your remarkable career?

AJ: You have to keep yourself in tune, you tune a car, you have to tune the individual as well. You have to be in tune with everything around you, and that is very difficult these days. The difficulty with young people, as opposed to what it was forty or fifty years ago, you have many more distractions now, many more. You have this advance of technology that's not commensurate to other things, technology is going through the roof, but the culture is not, so you have to be in tune, in order to keep an interesting life and keep progressing — you have to be in tune with the elements around you and here we have a lot of distractions. Youngsters, even if you grow up in the age of Duke Ellington or Jimmie Lunceford, you still had to be aware of distractions, and distractions are the thing impede or halt your career, and you have a lot of them now, with technology being what it is today you have a lot of things out there now that young people have to cope with, have to deal with.

Q: Musically speaking, what were those big moments you recall as you followed your chosen path?

AJ: I had some historic moments in my career, I have had some moments when I backed off and didn't work at all. I had a record company from 1969 to 1972, and that was a period of time when I was trying to stay

home and get out of the touring end of it, but I have some historic events that have meaning in my life — I worked the 25th Anniversary of Duke Ellington at Carnegie Hall in 1952 with Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker with strings, Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz and sadly now I'm the only one living. There may be some ensemble members still living among those groups, I don't know, but the headliners are all gone except me. That was a very historic moment, and certainly remains in my mind, Carnegie Hall 1952, Duke Ellington's 25th Anniversary concert. There have been many moments — winning the JC Award in Pittsburgh along with Jonas Salk who discovered the polio vaccine, being elected to the Order of Arts and Letters by the government of France, and I had a host of other things: NEA Masters, which is a nice achievement, in fact I am going to the new inductees for 2012 because they ask the Past Masters to come and attend the sessions every year when they induct the new masters, so the NEA Masters is very special.

Q: Returning to *Blue Moon* and what you have said about home being your favourite venue, do you have plans to tour the album?

AJ: I am touring with this group, I am not sure whether I will do festivals or not, I only do special events now, and some of the festivals I turn down, I did a lot of festivals this year [2011] I did six concerts in August ending up in Istanbul, so I am not saying I not doing festivals, but I am doing special things; I am not doing club work at all right now; I'm not saying never, but right now I'm not accepting any club dates. Hopefully the future holds discovery, I am doing things every day, my plans are to

keep life as interesting as possible, that enables me to keep going, life is very interesting!

Q: What lovely positive note to end on, thank you so much for your time it was a great privilege to speak with you

Wind Up.

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