

Ahmad Jamal thinks big with jazz band

By Howard Reich | Chicago Tribune critic
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Fifty years ago, pianist Ahmad Jamal released an album that not only shattered jazz convention but, surprisingly, also made him a pop phenomenon.

Recorded live on the South Side of Chicago, "Ahmad Jamal at the Pershing" announced a revolutionary way of playing the piano, even as its hit single—"Poinciana"—conquered jukeboxes from coast to coast (and beyond). Ever since, Jamal has remained an unrepentant jazz radical, his subversive ways of addressing the piano influencing generations of musicians.



Yet until Friday night, precious few listeners had heard the iconoclastic artist perform live in an orchestral setting. Could Jamal's sometimes soft-spoken pianism hold up against a roaring big band? Would his convulsive, stop-start brand of improvisation throw the orchestra into disarray?

A capacity audience packed Orchestral Hall to hear what would happen, and the results proved viscerally exciting, though a bit frustrating too. For if Jamal's partnership with the Chicago Jazz Orchestra underscored the vitality of his work, the brevity of their time onstage together didn't allow the experiment to fully develop. Because the first half of the evening had been devoted to Jamal's trio, only the concert's brief conclusion featured the orchestral venture.

If the idea was to leave the audience yearning for more, it worked. To hear Jamal dodge and parry with Jeff Lindberg's CJO was to appreciate anew the ingenuity of Jamal's stylistic breakthroughs.

The evening's tour de force unfolded in a collection of three vignettes that, together, amounted to a kind of concerto for jazz trio and orchestra.

In the opener, Jamal's "The Aftermath," the trio played an extended introduction that summed up Jamal's modus operandi: telegraphic phrases, sudden silences, jagged shards of melody, stunning shifts from loud to soft and back. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the orchestra leapt into the proceedings, unleashing volcanic eruptions and restless rhythms of its own.

In effect, Jamal's pianism had been transposed to orchestral dimension, and was all the more effective for it. When Jamal, the trio and the orchestra finally joined forces, the degree of rhythmic tension was almost unbearable.

Jamal's lovely jazz waltz "Should I?" formed the middle movement of the de facto concerto, to mixed effect. If the strict three-quarter time format inhibited the pianist's ability to subvert tempo and meter, the piece still yielded exquisitely refined musicmaking.

The finale, "Devil's in My Den," illuminated Jamal's gifts as accompanist, a facet of his work typically overshadowed by the virtuosity of his solos. But when Jamal hammered chords or inserted riffs while CJO soloists brayed alongside him, there was no doubt who was driving this performance.

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