

Keith Jarrett: Melody, Song and Beyond

By Wayne McConnell

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Keith Jarrett is without doubt one of the foremost musicians of the 20th Century. His ability to craft melody in a way which brings out the beauty of Classical Music, the dazzle of Bebop, the feeling from the Blues and all with a touch that is so personal and unique. Above his many attributes (dazzling piano technique, prolific composer, and his extraordinary ability to adapt beyond just being versatile) is his concern for melody and song. Melody is one of three basic elements that make up music (the others being harmony and rhythm). Keith is a master of all these elements but it is his ability to render melody in a profoundly beautiful way that makes him so unique.

In his documentary 'The Art of Improvisation' Jarrett suggests that he was a born improviser 'I learnt that through playing classical music'[1].

This statement reveals that the music closest to his heart is the music he makes in the moment. As a pianist he has covered lots of classical repertoire; [Arvo Pärt](#), *Fratres* on *Tabula Rasa* with [Gidon Kremer](#) (1984), Johann Sebastian Bach, [Goldberg Variations](#) (1989) and [Dmitri Shostakovich](#), [24 Preludes and Fugues](#) (1991) to name a few. Jarrett is a music maker; he operates on the grounds of self creativity and production of new music whether through improvisations on familiar tunes or new works for Symphony Orchestra.

He is mostly well known for his solo piano works and his standards Trio featuring bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette. The trio has been working for over a decade and produced some of jazz's most memorable recordings. Personal favourites are *Tokyo 96*, *Standards in Norway* and *Standards Vol1 and 2*. The trio don't rehearse and all the music played is true to the form of the song. They sometimes add in vamp sections or take a tune outside moving into a new improvisation. The material is easy, the tunes familiar and yet the trio manage to play them in a way that sounds fresh as the day they were written. Let's face it, you would expect this band to play complex original compositions or far out free jazz but, they chose not to. Instead they explore the endless possibilities of the emotional content of the Great American Songbook. They are just playing standards but they are not JUST playing standards. They are playing the melody, they are playing the song and beyond.

Standards make up a huge catalogue that has become 'standard' repertoire for the working jazz musician. They were written mostly by the Jewish Composers working in Tin Pan Alley between the 1920s and 60s. Rogers and Hammerstein, Jerome Kern, Gershwin, many of the songs were written for musicals and operas. Some of the tunes are very simple remaining in one key while others more complex with multiple key changes and longer forms. Jazz musicians reharmonised them and used them as vehicles for improvisation. Charlie Parker wrote lots of 'heads'[2] on the harmonies of existing tunes like *How High The Moon*, *I Got Rhythm* and *Just One of Those Things* to name a few. Jazz musicians at some point during their development will work out specific versions of their favourite players playing standards noting changed

harmony (chord substitutions) and in some cases, altered melody. Vamps, intros, endings and extended cadenza-like sections can be added to give a new 'take' on a familiar tune. Jarrett's trio does this, but it also does something else. They go beyond the melody, the chords and the rhythm and they consider the song.

Emotion and Music

Measuring the emotional impact of music on people is intrinsically difficult because everyone can/will be affected or moved in a different way. It is useful to separate composition from improvisation (but I will re-connect these later) at this stage. With composition or something that remains static (played the same way every time) there are methods of collecting data concerning emotional content. Professor Benjamin Boone at California State addresses this with his 'Emotional Barometer Analytical Technique'[3];

...it should be noted that research shows that no piece of music has an inherent emotional content that will be gleaned by all listeners. Indeed, each listener will bring their own psyche to the listening experience, and the emotions they are feeling at the time will certainly influence the emotions they project onto the music. Music unlocks the emotional portion of the brain in somewhat predictable ways, but what emotion is felt in a particular passage will be described in a variety of ways by a variety of listeners

Boone goes on to say that certain musical effects and devices produce similar emotions. For example the notion that minor keys are sad and major ones happy. Fast tempos give excitement and slower ones give a more serene effect. These statements are very broad and generalised and don't consider other musical elements which affect emotion such as dynamics and phrasing/articulation and the song as a whole. Overall these elementary observations can only be a tiny insight into how humans hear music. They can also only be applied to music that remains the same over more than one listening. Due to this, improvised music is a more complex phenomenon.

The nature of improvisation in jazz is centred on the ability to release individual emotion through a specific language (something that separates jazz improvisation from improvising in another style). It is often described as telling a story through harmony, melody and rhythm. Are jazz performers improvising or are they composing in real-time? Perhaps composing in real time is a better way to describe the functional aspect of improvisation in jazz. I have confidence in Keith Jarrett. I believe that every time he plays he is aiming to extract the emotion the song as well as from his mind. I believe his emotional mind and the song itself is the source of inspiration to his improvisations, not the improvisation itself. Maybe Bach, Beethoven and Mozart were composing in real-time (improvising) when 'writing' their most celebrated works. We will never know. Does jazz have a more direct link to emotional content than a composer who uses a mathematical formula (such as Golden Section) to create music? Is Golden Section a result of some freak coincidence or was it an attempt to draw on outside influences (in this case mathematics) in music? These are largely unanswered questions.

When Jarrett plays 'Stella By Starlight' for the 200th time he is drawing on very many influential factors to dictate the direction of the tune, they can be broken down into subheadings:

Human Emotion and Communication:

- His own mood/emotions at that particular moment in time
- Gary Peacock's Mood/emotions and any recent connection to Keith

- Jack DeJohnette's Mood/emotions and any recent connection to Keith
- Combinations of the above
- The audience vs Keith
- The audience vs Gary and Jack

Physical Factors:

- The Piano
- The Venue
- Overall Sound
- The sound of the drums from the piano (and vice versa)
- The sound of the bass from the piano (and vice versa)
- The sound of the audience
- The audience itself (as a group)
- The audience vs the room
- The lighting
- The temperature

Musical Factors:

- Choice of song (ballad, medium swing, latin, groove etc)
- The pre-existing emotional content of the song itself (composers intention, lyrics)
- Musical elements of the song; (minor key, major key, modulations, tempo, dynamics, any time changes or arrangements etc)
- Musical Dialogue between players (how the other players respond to Keith's input and how he responds to their input).
- How inspired the players are by each other's playing (this can be hot and cold, sometimes magic happens, other times it doesn't).
- Sounds from band members or audience in response to the music (Keith's vocalisations might influence the direction of all players as can audience coos and encouragements).

From this we can see there are many, maybe even infinite reasons to play and render melody differently depending on the above factors. Many players don't think about these but Keith is one who does. Most importantly is his interest with the emotional content of the song. His Jazz Standards Trio approaches the tunes with an unspoken rule that allows each of them to break the rules. Usually they stay within strict form but vamps are added and codas extended and "Stella by Starlight" might go outside and never come back in.

They have been touring once or twice a year and don't see each other in between. The first tune of the first concert of any tour is always a song they have never before played together; 'Something about that freshness gets us zapped right back where we want to be. We're always looking to find the centre of the song, whatever that means and however mystical it might get. If we find the emotional centre, then we can avoid getting emotional about it. That's something you cannot learn in youth. In youth, you have the tendency to indulge your emotions about the music

rather than finding the emotion already there.'

This statement suggests that he draws mostly on the emotional content of the tune rather than adding in masses of personal emotive content. Involvement of personal emotions is unavoidable but it is not the centre of inspiration for them, it's the song itself. Maybe that is why jazz musicians have mostly stopped using popular music as vehicles for improvisation. Maybe today's popular music doesn't have a 'centre'. Maybe the standards of yesteryear exemplify emotion in the compositional form. There is a reason they are called 'standards'. Some jazz musicians use today's pop songs for improvising over Brad Mehldau and Geoff Keezer draw from Radiohead, Bjork and The Beatles while the Bad Plus draw from Nirvana and Black Sabbath. Perhaps it is the artist's ability to see and extract the emotional content of songs that others don't yet see. Is it the reinvention of the song that brings new life and therefore new emotive content? However he does it, Keith Jarrett plays songs and melodies and moves beyond them but still somehow relating to the song and the personal space that surrounds the musicians as they perform. His art is pure, true and surely that is what jazz is about.

[1] Keith Jarrett; The Art of Improvisation DVD

[2] A 'head' is a new melody written on a pre-existing chord sequence.

[3] <http://www.benjaminboone.net/documents/BenjaminBooneEmotionalBarometer.pdf>