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MUSIC REVIEW

A Jazzman Swinging to Rhapsody and Back

Ahmad Jamal, Pianist, Opens Lincoln Center Season



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Ahmad Jamal, at the piano. He and his ensemble, and a guest trumpeter, opened Jazz at Lincoln Center's season Thursday at the Rose Theater.

By NATE CHINEN
Published: September 20, 2013

As the pianist Ahmad Jamal and the members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra took their bows at the Rose Theater on Thursday night, someone in the crowd filed a simple but urgent request. "Poinciana!" he shouted against the applause. "Poinciana!" he shouted again, hoarsely. "Poinciana! Poinciana! Poinciana!" Eventually reality set in: the house lights went up, and the audience began to file toward the doors.

"Poinciana," in case the name means nothing to you, is a tune by Nat Simon that Mr. Jamal [recorded with his trio in 1958](#). A small masterpiece of floating groove, careful in its application of pressure, it belongs to the small society of jazz compositions that have become runaway pop hits. Just as "Take Five" defined Brubeck and Desmond, it has been an ageless signature for Mr. Jamal — and maybe a bit of a burden, given the irreducible scope of his output since.

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Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
Wynton Marsalis playing a solo on Mr. Jamal's "Baalbek."

Why should it matter that Mr. Jamal didn't play "Poinciana" here, amid the festive light-pomp of the season opener for Jazz at Lincoln Center? He did play it in the same room a couple of years ago; likewise when he opened Jazz at Lincoln Center's 2008-9 season, in [a concert structured exactly like this one](#). And there was a welcome hint of the tune's gait and bass line in "Saturday Morning," a quietly majestic ballad that Mr. Jamal offered in the first half.

So the omission meant nothing, except perhaps as a metaphor. At the end of an elegant two-hour concert that showcased Mr. Jamal's capacity for building tension within tight spaces, it was bewilderingly easy to feel unfulfilled. Just as that guy barking his request did, I left the Rose Theater in disappointment, thinking about missed opportunities. For me it wasn't about a song, but rather a spirit of engagement.

Mr. Jamal, 83, organizes his music as a series of dynamic events, pinballing between binary extremes: loud/soft, fast/slow, big/small. During the concert's first half, which featured Reginald Veal on bass, Herlin Riley on drums and Manolo Badrena on percussion, he ran the bandstand like a contractor surveying a job site, often turning from the piano to wave an arm or shoot a glare. Every song in the quartet's 40-minute set involved a form of Latin rhythm, and every song ended with a crisp, decisive snap.

Mr. Riley and Mr. Veal make an ideal rhythm team for this music, just as they have for Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln Center's artistic director. On "Morning Mist" and "Silver," they laid an earthy foundation, trancelike but alert. They were impeccable on "[Saturday Morning](#)," the title track of Mr. Jamal's new album on the Jazz Village label, which features the same personnel. But the whole mood was terse, reined in.

That extended to the concert's second half, featuring enlargements of Mr. Jamal's music by members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. One problem was the harmonic inertia of the material: "Baalbek," in an arrangement by the alto saxophonist Sherman Irby, couldn't gather much forward pull even during a trumpet solo by Mr. Marsalis. (It was his only solo all night, which made the concert's title, "Ahmad Jamal and Wynton Marsalis," a little misleading.)

Where the second half hit its stride was in two arrangements that captured the variability of Mr. Jamal's style. The trumpeter Marcus Printup made "[Manhattan Reflections](#)" into an episodic saga, with punchy accents giving way to grand, flowing gestures. And the saxophonist Ted Nash gave "Kaleidoscope" a marvelous range of ideas, including a burst of Dixielandish counterpoint followed by a lush canopy of modern chords, in descending sequence.

Then, after an interlude by Mr. Jamal, the band revved back into gear, swinging hard behind a commanding solo by the trombonist Elliot Mason. Somehow this was the evening's only stretch of swinging rhythm, but that wasn't why it felt like a revelation. It was because Mr. Jamal and the band seemed both locked in and free; for a few fleeting moments, they left nothing to be desired.

Ahmad Jamal appears through Saturday at the Rose Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th Street and Broadway; (212) 721-6500, jalc.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 22, 2013



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An earlier version of this review misidentified the composer of "Poinciana." He was Nat Simon, not Ahmad Jamal. (Buddy Bernier wrote the lyrics.)

A version of this review appears in print on September 21, 2013, on page C3 of the New York edition with the headline: A Jazzman Swinging To Rhapsody and Back.

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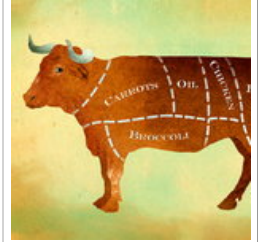
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