

Dinner and Conversation: Background noise and the early criticisms of Ahmad Jamal

By Daniel Marx

As an undergraduate music student, I hosted a program for Liverpool Student Radio, playing the best of the new jazz I was listening to each week. Very early on in that endeavour, I railed against Damien Chazelle's award-winning film, *La La Land* (2016) for what I considered to be its short-sighted, ignorant views on the state of jazz today. The one thing the film seemed to get right, with regards to jazz, was that this music is something about which people feel very strongly and often such opinions are formed without context or experience. The film's female lead, portrayed by Emma Stone, makes clear early on that her perception of jazz is Kenny G, elevator music and dinner music. The film's male lead, played especially irritably by Ryan Gosling, is intensely pained in his role as a pianist, accompanying restaurant customers with a Christmas themed setlist. In *La La Land*, music that is deemed by the film and by Gosling's character to be 'lesser', is accompanied by background noise and other distractions – an inane, jazzy rendition of 'Jingle Bells' is accompanied by the clinking of glasses and the quiet chatter of customers. True moments of musical inspiration, however, see the audience disappear, fading into the background while Gosling has a transcendent moment at the piano.

The subject of this month's Magpie Trio set had a cultural impact that, oftentimes, revolved around the perception of his trio's role as a dinner music act. Before the significance of his late 1950s recordings became apparent, **Ahmad Jamal** was dismissed by critics as merely a "cocktail pianist" (Nicoll-Agnew, 1987, p.62). The success of his late 1950s live albums, and their subsequent induction into the jazz canon, however, would indicate otherwise. I can only surmise that either the contemporary criticisms were entirely without merit (a line of thinking that, while satisfying, is probably not completely fair), or that Jamal was contributor to the elevation of dinner jazz to a far greater cultural value than a film like *La La Land* would otherwise derisively suggest.

If you've spent any time with Jamal's live trio recordings at the Spotlight Club or the Pershing Lounge, you'll be aware of what makes that music so special: the tinkling, high-register improvisational inserts, the clever references to other pieces of music, the tight, interlocking bass grooves from bassist, Israel Crosby, and so on. What struck me, however, particularly when looking at these records as historical artifacts, was the constant presence of background noise from the audience, not as an annoyance or a distraction, but as an integral part of the place of these recordings in the jazz canon. This ambient noise feels fundamental to the sound of these live albums, but it does raise the question of how important the music actually was to the people eating out on the nights the recordings took place. It's not just the scraping of plates and the clinking of glasses that can be heard, but also laughter and animated chatter. Such chatter is particularly noticeable on the trio's wonderfully original rendition of 'Autumn Leaves', recorded at the Spotlight in 1958, where the audience's conversations are just as lively as Crosby's striking bass grooves. Gosling's character from *La La Land* would probably dismiss the audience's behaviour as disrespectful; ignorantly unaware of the history being made as they go about eating their dinner.

Jazz scholar, Mark Laver, however, points to a more symbiotic relationship between the music of figures like Ahmad Jamal and the restaurant dining experience, describing jazz as “dinner music par excellence” (2020, p.295).

In live albums, the music is clearly in the forefront, the figure against the ground of the dining soundscape, with the recording mics picking up just enough of the crowd noise to remind listeners of the location and to make the illusion of the live experience more visceral and more complete. Nevertheless, the background sounds of glasses, metal, china, conversation, and laughter all serve to normalize the link between jazz and restaurants (p.294).

The audience then, serves its purpose in favour of the musicians, in that they cement jazz as a live artform. The presence of this background noise is less a disrespectful slight on the performers, and more a reminder that the power of this music is in being present in the moment, the musicians’ connections with each other and with their audience. The chattering diners on these recordings may not have realised the significance of the music that accompanied their meals, but that unawareness makes their presence all the more fascinating from a historical perspective. Were we, as modern-day listeners, present in the room at the time these performances took place, would we have taken notice of the innovation happening on stage, or would we have just eaten and conversed like everybody else?

The mere fact that the answer to such a question is unknowable is not the only particularly frustrating thing about confronting the role of background noise in Ahmad Jamal’s *Argo Sessions*. If we are to accept that jazz is fundamentally a live art form, and that so much of its value comes from being in the room while it’s happening, then where do we find ourselves now. This torrent of ideas is set to accompany a live streamed performance. George Crowley, Tom Farmer and Sam Jesson are going to be performing their take on Jamal’s music in a room together, but none of us get to be there in person. We won’t even have the comfort of the recorded audience chatter that fills the Ahmad Jamal albums with so much warmth. Given the conditions of this current lockdown, we are lucky to have any approximation of live music we can get, but with it comes an existential question of what live music even is anymore.

There is a privilege in getting to experience this kind of music making from home. We get to control, down to the finest detail, the environment in which we take in the performance, and while we can’t drum up a crowd of people to fill our living rooms, this is an opportunity to recontextualise Ahmad Jamal’s work, not just musically, but experientially. Most of us watching this performance will not have been in the room while Jamal’s trio were recording these live albums, but being at home and watching his music being performed gives us the opportunity to approximate what the experience of being in that room might have been like. So, with that in mind, I plan on watching Magpie Trio’s performance in low light with dinner, a beer and pretending that the background noise of lockdown-violating teenagers yelling at each other outside my window are other restaurant attendees sharing this experience. Take that Damien Chazelle.

References

Laver, M. (2020), ‘Dinner Jazz: Consumption, Improvisation, and the Politics of Listening’, *Jazz Perspectives*, 12:3, pp. 291-310.

Nicoll Agnew, A. (1987) *The Music of Ahmad Jamal*. BA thesis. University of Illinois.