

# JAZZ

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# Man overboard?

Keith Jarrett lost his cool in Perugia.  
What was he thinking?

By Josef Woodard  
Photos by Rose Anne Jarrett

**FOR MOST INTENTS AND PURPOSES**, Keith Jarrett is riding high at the moment. In 2008, the occasionally controversial jazz pianist will celebrate the 25th anniversary of his stellar trio with drummer Jack DeJohnette and bassist Gary Peacock. Since the turn of the century, Jarrett has produced several commanding additions to his massive discography. His trio — the so-called “standards trio” — has ventured into more unstructured, abstract terrain on *Inside Out* (2001) and *Always Let Me Go: Live in Tokyo* (2002), and has eloquently covered standards on *Whisper Not* (2000), *The Out-of-Towners* (2004), and a stunning new live release, *My Foolish Heart*, recorded at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 2001. Jarrett’s parallel life as an improvisatory solo pianist is documented on 2005’s *Radiance* and on last year’s *The Carnegie Hall Concert*. What’s more, Jarrett, now 63 and playing with great depth and character, has overcome — or at least learned to live with — the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome that forced him to take a hiatus for a few years in the late ’90s.

More than most jazz artists, Jarrett has always enjoyed a double life. He commands high wages and billings, but he’s also fairly insular, resolutely remaining outside the jazz world and writing his own rulebook.

In the opinion of many (present company included), Jarrett is jazz’s greatest living pianist. Enriched by classical training and an exploratory spirit, he has raised the art of improvising to lofty heights. But on a bad day, he can seem like jazz’s foulest spirit.

Online criticism flowed far and wide regarding an incident that occurred on such a day this summer. Jarrett’s Wikipedia page summarizes that episode under the heading “Perugia Incident.”

Jarrett has always expressed his opinions freely and candidly onstage, especially regarding the sensitive subject of cameras in the audience. The trio adamantly opposes audience-based photography, which has increased recently through cell-phone cameras and compact video cameras.

During the 2007 Umbria Jazz Festival, in Perugia, Italy — which Jarrett has visited since the mid-’70s — before playing one note and without apparent incitement, he approached the microphone and blew up, leaving tact and wit behind: “I do not speak Italian,” he fumed, “so someone who speaks English can tell all these assholes with cameras to turn them fucking off right now. Right now! No more photographs, including that red light right there. If we see any more lights, I reserve the right — and I think the privilege is yours to hear us — but I reserve the right, and Jack and Gary reserve the right, to stop playing and leave the goddamn city.”

It’s fair to say that the audience, 4,500 strong, was stunned by this foul-mouthed pre-emptive strike, with Jarrett suddenly sounding like a salty-tongued longshoreman. The next morning, festival director Carlo Pagnotta announced that Jarrett was permanently banned from the festival. “As an artist, Jarrett is sublime,” Pagnotta said through a







translator, “but as a person, he leaves much to be desired. It was unfortunate that we had to witness the schizophrenia of these two aspects.” Before long, a pirated video of the explosion had appeared on YouTube.

In Perugia, Jarrett’s behavior might have seemed demonic, the height of rudeness from someone whose stock-in-trade, ironically, is the pursuit of real-time sublimity. Yet his performance that night was angelic. The concert included a ravishing “I’m Gonna Laugh You Right Out of My Life,” with an extended, sighing denouement on the final chord, and a sleek consideration of John Lewis’ “Django.” The trio closed with a bright, sweeping spin through “Joy Spring.” Following a few defiant camera flashes and expletives from the crowd, the group declined to play a customary encore.

**FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES**, Jarrett has resided in a seemingly idyllic rural area close to the Pennsylvania/New Jersey border. His 18th-century house is nestled in a woodsy area, with a separate studio (where he recorded his first post-Chronic Fatigue Syndrome album, *The Melody at Night with You*, in 1999). Literally and symbolically, Jarrett lives in a remote and rustic corner of the world, a location situated between his birth city of Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Manhattan.

On a rainy afternoon in August, we sat down to talk in his upstairs office, which was somehow both cluttered and neatly organized. Mementos, childhood toys, souvenirs from abroad, and stray CDs such as Peggy Lee’s *Mink Jazz* filled the room with a resonant sense of a life fully lived. As usual, he was thoughtful and funny.

A month had passed since Perugia, and the topic was the elephant in the room. His thoughts on the incident revealed the workings of a mind that tends to extensively rework and rephrase concepts and themes.

According to Jarrett, he became enraged in Perugia when he walked onstage, after an announcer had given the no-camera warning in Italian, and saw telltale red lights in the crowd. Jarrett had issued calmer statements about audience photography earlier in the tour, for example, at the Montreal Jazz Festival several days before. There, after camera flashes went off before encores, he spoke about everyday technophiles being “lobotomized by toys” and about the importance of listening with ears instead of eyes.

Had he reached a boiling point by Perugia?

“Interestingly, it wasn’t a boiling point,” he says. “There was lack of any kind of bad mood. I didn’t even have time to boil. But what happens to us when we walk out onstage — that’s the time we’re focusing, not when we’re already at our instruments. So already, we are susceptible, more vulnerable.

“[People in the audience] didn’t buy a ticket to see saints onstage. They bought a ticket to hear the music. And what happened was that [patrons with cameras] started fucking with our focus. And our focus was what we got paid to have, and what [the audience] paid for.”

Several days after Perugia, Jarrett’s trio performed in Brescia, Italy, without incident or onstage tirades. “They were absolutely a perfect audience,” Jarrett says, “and we played one of the best concerts we ever played. Now I’m not so sure whether it would have been like that had the other thing not happened five days before.” (Actually, YouTube also sports a video shot surreptitiously in Brescia.)

“In the trio’s history,” Jarrett says, “Jack and Gary are the two people who most complained about [audience photography], but were not willing to complain about it publicly.”

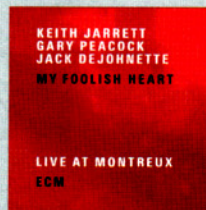
Jarrett sees the Perugia incident as an extreme but valid response to disruptive audience members. Always seeking musical

### Keith Jarrett/Gary Peacock/Jack DeJohnette

*My Foolish Heart*

(ECM)

A collection of timeless standards ... bassist and drummer



at once in sync with, and operating independently of, their leader ... off-key and sometimes off-putting wordless singing above virtuoso piano figures.

Yes, it’s a live Keith Jarrett recording. The formula is familiar, but the work remains deeply satisfying.

Along with his longtime Standards Trio band mates (bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette), Jarrett has perfected the art of making well-worn classics sound fresh. It’s not that he completely deconstructs a melody — it’s more a matter of establishing certain moods. The title song, as familiar a ballad as there is in jazz, shifts from an almost classical melancholy to a light swing, with Peacock’s bass lines becoming firmer and Jarrett’s own playing growing more percussive as the song progresses.

It’s always interesting to see who Jarrett chooses to interpret for these standards recordings. Here, we get two songs each from Sammy Cahn and Fats Waller, as well as helpings of Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins among the 13 songs on this two-disc set. The diversity of composers allows Jarrett to showcase his remarkable stylistic range. The tenderness of “Only the Lonely” and the hard-driving ragtime of “Honeysuckle Rose” couldn’t be farther apart, yet both end up sounding uniquely like Jarrett.

There are the moments of self-indulgence that Jarrett occasionally succumbs to — his solos on “Straight, No Chaser” seem to wander aimlessly — but mostly the performances are remarkably focused considering there’s nearly two hours of music here.

— John Frederick Moore

purity onstage, he not only opposes the use of cameras during performances, he also demands a quality piano and silence from the house — especially during solo concerts. “Whether this makes me a bad guy or not doesn’t bother me,” he says. “What I’m trying to do is to leave a legacy of seriousness along with the ecstasy that’s possible in the music — and to leave that a little purer than the so-called jazz audience thinks it should be now.

“Jazz is a funny thing. No one required silence in the beginning. It was freedom, just to be able to sing your song. Who cares if anybody listens? The thing was survival. But what’s difficult for some people to understand is that artistic survival in this age is exactly the same as that survival — physical survival — was then. Artistic survival now has become so difficult due to visual-media infiltrating. You can ask a little kid how they like a song and they’ll tell you what they think of the video. There’s something wrong with that.”

Jarrett doesn’t apologize for his outburst in Perugia, but admits that the crowd “was a sacrificial audience. I feel very sad about them. I don’t feel that was fair to them. If I was sitting there, I would feel offended, too. Especially if I wasn’t taking the photographs.”

**SINCE BURSTING ONTO THE 1960S JAZZ SCENE** — first with Art Blakey, then more notably as the scene-stealing pianist in the popular Charles Lloyd Quartet (which included a young and fiery DeJohnette) — Jarrett has forged an uncompromising ►►





## The Standards Trio — 25 years along

**DESPITE ONGOING FRUSTRATIONS** with live performances, Jarrett has built much of his career and discography around concert life. Before it was released this year on the ECM label, *My Foolish Heart* — a live recording of Jarrett's trio at the 2001 Montreux Jazz Festival — was just another recording lurking in the pianist's vast archive of live tapes.

"I kept thinking, *But then there's Montreux*," Jarrett recalls. "I'd listen to it and realize how connected Jack and Gary are in terms of tempo and precision, much like some of the great club recordings of Miles' quintet, where you can tell that everyone can hear the time so well that they're playing this pointillistic thing."

*My Foolish Heart's* set list includes classics like Miles' "Four," a decidedly non-straight version of Monk's "Straight, No Chaser," Sonny Rollins' "Oleo," stride numbers by Fats Waller — anomalies for Jarrett — and lustrous, rubato balladry. If the album plays like a statement of purpose, it also ties in with the trio's original cornerstone 1983 studio recordings, being reissued next January as a specially priced 3-CD set, titled *Setting Standards*, to honor the group's 25th anniversary.

On *My Foolish Heart*, Jarrett says, the trio's "classic center is there — the center of where we're coming from, from which lots of tangents occur. And it shows that our relationship to the past is much clearer than many people might know." Referring to their slide into stride, Jarrett adds, "To do that with integrity is very hard. We would do old stride things at sound check, when we were joking, just having a good moment.

"But jazz was always about having fun — the fun component — which has now darkened considerably. If you listen to [Art] Tatum, he's having a hell of a good time, but every now and

then, the mastery of technique was the only way he could blow your mind. We're losing the basis of joy in art."

As for the title track, Jarrett notes, "We never played that song before, and we never played it after that. I thought, *If people relate this song to any jazz player, it's going to be Bill Evans*. I don't like to inhabit other peoples' territory unless there's something really new being delivered through it. I stick so close to the melody and yet play so many different feelings around it that I finally felt free enough to be part owner."

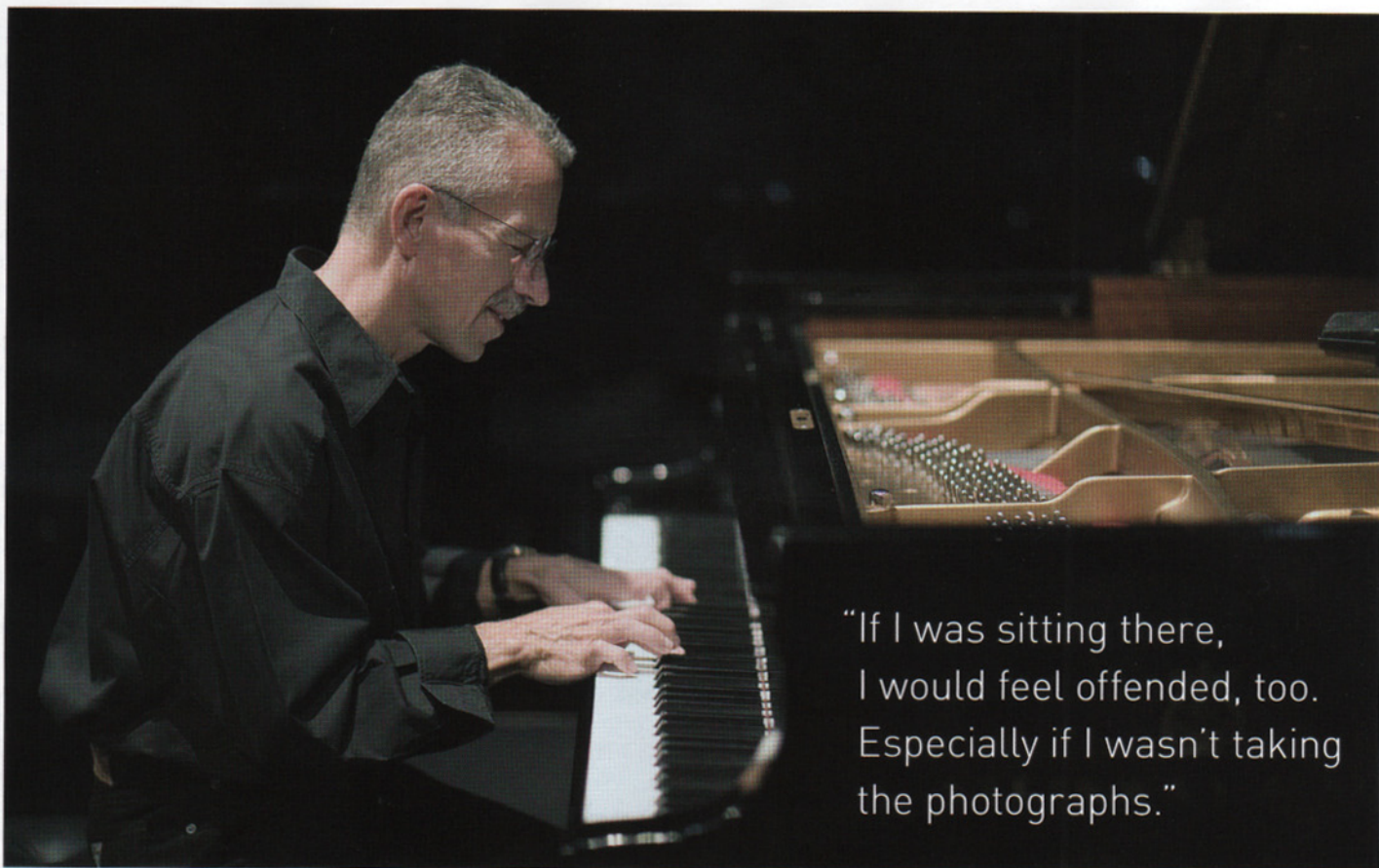
Jarrett's unusually tight rapport with DeJohnette and Peacock sometimes verges on onstage telepathy. He appreciates the trio's longevity as well as its us-against-the-world attitude.

"Nobody I ever played with I got to know like these two guys," Jarrett asserts. "Nobody in Miles' band, and nobody in my quartet. Maybe I got to know Paul [Motian] in a special way. Charlie [Haden] was strung out at the time, and Dewey [Redman] was, too. I knew Charles [Lloyd] on an intellectual level, maybe.

"But this was different. I knew it 15 years ago because every time we'd go on the road, we connected onstage, backstage, and on days off, at dinner together. It's not that there weren't intense discussions about things or even heated arguments about philosophy."

After 25 years, there are no plans to stop the forward momentum of this trio, which has become one of jazz history's most prized ensembles. "Most of the time you're in a group," Jarrett says, "you know some reasons you're in a group. But you also know some reasons why you don't want to be in the group very long. When we're playing together, nobody's thinking about that because there are no bylaws. There are no arrangements being handed out. It's just, 'We're here. Let's do it.'" ▲





"If I was sitting there, I would feel offended, too. Especially if I wasn't taking the photographs."

vision. From 1969 to 1971, he played with Miles Davis during the trumpeter's electric period (documented on the incendiary albums *Live/Evil* and *Live at the Fillmore East*). Although he swore off electric keyboards post-Miles, Jarrett still reveres Davis, especially during his earlier acoustic era.

During the '70s, Jarrett pioneered the free-form solo-piano format, while also leading two respected quartets: the "American" group with bassist Charlie Haden, tenor saxist Dewey Redman, and drummer Paul Motian; and his "European" group, with saxist Jan Garbarek, bassist Palle Danielsson, and drummer Jon Christensen. By the early '80s, Jarrett was cleaning artistic house again, setting aside his solo-piano work and establishing the durable "standards trio."

For a time during the '80s and '90s, Jarrett recorded works by Bach, Handel, Shostakovich, and other classical composers. But the charm wore off. "In classical music," he comments, "it's about getting the notes right and the feeling right and the vision right. But it bores the hell out of me sometimes to think about it.

"You're a slave to those notes forever," he continues. "There are no surprises. I was backstage in Washington, D.C. during one of my early recitals, and I couldn't figure out why I didn't feel more excited about it. I realized it was because I knew everything that was going to happen."

Through the years, Jarrett has repeatedly satisfied his creative needs with the trio, which usually taps into the "standards" repertoire — albeit with uncommon interactive sensitivity, insight, and adaptability. As Jarrett explains, "The fact of us all having played with Miles has lent the trio the ability to be like a band made up of more than three people."

With little or no guile, Jarrett also considers the trio "a piano-less group. When we're playing, I don't think about being the pianist in the trio. My favorite bands — maybe, with the exception

of Miles — were often piano-less bands — Gerry Mulligan's band, Ornette [Coleman's]. I try to detoxify the harmonic language to the extent that anything can happen. Then it's not a harmonic language anymore. It's an instrument with 88 sounds on it.

"I don't mind playing piano and knowing it's a piano, like in some of the introductions or even some of the material where the tonality is so important that then I'm working in the Mozart arena — where it's how you touch the instrument and how much grace in a harmony you can have. There is an aggression in pianists that I might look like I have by how I move, but I think it's not there. There's a 'Musicality First' principle, and not a 'bang, bang, bang' thing. Too often, I hear people comp, and there's no grace there. But I've come to like the piano way more than 10 years ago."

Looking back, Jarrett sees that *The Melody at Night with You*, radical in its melodic simplicity and lack of soloing, "may have been the beginning of the turning point for me. I think I made peace with [the piano]."

Needless to say, Jarrett takes his work seriously.

"Well, somebody has to," he explains. "It's such a pop culture now. Even the classical world is pop culture. Everybody's got to look good.

"To me, serious is all there is. I once did a thing on the West Coast called 'Music for Serious Drinking.' 'Serious drinking' is exactly the right phrase. You're literally going to get high, but it's a serious thing. If you can put those two things together, that's what I think of as the work that I have to do.

"And that's what I expect to happen in the audience, and that's why I demand so much of them. Because it isn't easy to get high off of someone else's drinking. It's a situation that demands a lot from an audience — whether it's the trio or solo — to the extent that they can imbibe something they didn't create or didn't order. But something about it affects them, and they don't leave." ▲