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February, 1989 \$1.75 U.K. £ 2.00

KEITH JARRETT

**Jazz Tapestries,
And Beyond**

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**RETURN OF THE
SAX DOCTOR**

KEITH JARRETT

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT E MINOR CHORD



TERI BLOOM

Like an unruly, self-determined river, Keith Jarrett's pursuit of musical truth has taken him in a multiplicity of directions, either coursing a wide swath or branching off into tiny tangential rivulets. Similarly, his audience has been alternately swept up by the current, carried into the sidestreams, or been left behind on the riverbanks.

Nature analogies are a real temptation when discussing the current stage of Jarrett's mercurial musical life. In the remote and small town on the western edge of New Jersey that Jarrett calls home, a sense of rural isolation prevails and the only local phone for use by strangers is in the municipal building. On the wintry day of our interview (Coleman Hawkins' would-be 84th birthday, it so happened), bleak, spindly trees ringed a humble lake, a holler away from Jarrett's home/studio. It's obvious that the pianist has hastened back to nature in a real way.

And in an aesthetic way. Asked about the seeming dichotomy of his engagements in both jazz and classical spheres—as well as his infrequent solo improvisational concerts—Jarrett likes to point to nature's example: she is supremely indiscriminatory, evolutionary, irregular and yet unswerving, inspiring and yet unpredictable. And, one might add, deaf to the advice and admonitions of humans. Jarrett is striving to reach a state of inevitability in his music such as that which makes a river flow. Lofty as that may sound (and he has heroically fended off epithets of pretentiousness for nearly 20 years now), Jarrett has come close—especially recently—to achieving his goal.

Precious few jazz artists have finagled the migration into classical repertoire; fewer still have made the reverse trip. When, five years ago, Jarrett broke with his firmly-ensconced jazz ranks and announced his plan to delve into classical music, it wasn't the late-blooming whim of a dilettante; rather, he was returning to the home turf on which a child prodigy from Allentown, Pennsylvania was weaned. Jazz bit the adolescent Jarrett hard. Rather than take the route to Juilliard and studies with Nadia Boulanger, Jarrett hit Berklee and the New York scene. Catapulted into notoriety in Charles Lloyd's popular crossover quartet (where Jarrett first met and played with Jack DeJohnette), Jarrett didn't last long as a sideman. He played briefly—and gutsily—with Miles Davis, as heard on *Live/Evil* (playing Fender Rhodes; it was the last time, along with the simultaneous release of *Ruta And Diatya*—a duet with DeJohnette—that the acoustic purist Jarrett played an electronic keyboard).

In the '70s, Jarrett bucked the Fusion mafia by dividing his energies between his American quartet (saxman Dewey Redman, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Paul Motian), his Scandinavian group (saxist Jan Garbarek, bassist Palle Danielsson, and drummer Jon Christensen), and his improvisational solo piano concerts—epic consciousness streams that danced on the shores of impressionism, gospel, bop, and other hybrid musical strains. Jarrett popularized the genre which, to his consternation, gave rise to George Winston and a spate of inane new age ivory ticklers of the '80s. In the early '80s, Jarrett repaired to his New Jersey woods to rehearse Bartok, Mozart, Bach, et al., and prepare for his descent into a demanding new musical realm. But before fully entering his latest phase, he felt the need to clear away emotional debris with *Spirits*—a deceptive work of folkish simplicity crudely overdubbed mostly with flutes and ethnic drums.

Word of new Jarrett releases is nothing shocking; with over 50 albums to date, he is music's rival to the cinema's Michael Caine for sheer prolificacy. But Jarrett's last three albums have been particularly noteworthy and revealing. For his first official classical session, Jarrett chose to tackle the hoary studies of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1*; his two-record set, *Still Live*, offers persuasive evidence of his jazz muscle tone in his ongoing trio with bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette; *Dark Intervals* is his first solo piano concert recording since 1982.

This three-point study in Jarrettography tells a good deal about his split affinities; he doesn't so much bounce from classical to jazz to piano scapes as he slides over into the separate but equal compartments of his musical being. *Dark Intervals*, particularly, is a testament to Jarrett's recent objective of broadening his scope while

paring down to the essence of music—and being. So, while he plots courses in parallel universes—planning to record Bach's *Goldberg Variations* on harpsichord and new works by Lou Harrison and Alan Hovhaness in the classical world, and reviving jazz standards in his trio—Jarrett is also searching for new meaning in a basic E minor chord. He's thinking about the river's source as well as its effects.

Josef Woodard: *Have reports of your eclecticism been greatly exaggerated?*

Keith Jarrett: Well, what's the definition of eclecticism, would you say?

JW: *Let's say purposefully drawing from divergent areas for material and concepts.*

KJ: Well, then I would say, yes, I'm eclectic except that if the definition means "divergent areas," I'd have to disagree that they're divergent [*laughs*].

I would put it differently. I would say that if I'm committed to my art, the way someone would be committed to, let's say, a different kind of life than an artist's, for someone to not use what he hears would be like someone not sleeping because it's different from being awake. You don't go to sleep in order to sleep. You go to sleep in order to be better when you're awake. To me, all the so-called divergent things I do are all pluses to each another. They create a synergy.

I can give you an example. With these last solo concerts, I could never have played so little music so effectively if I had not been working on my technique. The way I balance a chord itself can be a message—at least a message that I'm there and present. Whereas with improvisors in general and especially in jazz, people listen to *what* they play—they listen to the notes they play. Classical listeners listen to *how* a thing is played and they usually already know this piece. What I'm getting close to, because of this so-called eclecticism, is probably a way of playing for the few listeners who can listen to both what and how. But I could never have done that if I hadn't worked in these so-called divergent disciplines.

Did nature decide what she was going to attempt and what she wasn't going to attempt? Or did she just attempt something that was worth trying? From the point of view of not having a position, what is so different about doing the kinds of things that make people say, "Wait a minute, he just gave up jazz. No, he was never playing jazz. Now he's playing classical, but he's not classical. He's a jazz pianist." What if I legitimately hear these things? Is it illegal? [*laughs*] Certain birds or certain mammals, should they never have existed? Some of them have these funny problems with staying alive or moving around. Are we sad that they were ever invented?

JW: *With an improvised piece, does it start with a seed and then grow, or do you have a vague sense of general structure?*

KJ: I don't have any sense of that. I don't even have a seed when I start. I guess I'd say that it really does start with zero. The thing that's changed is that I can be comfortable with zero. For many listeners, they still want to live back in a previous time in my work. They don't realize that I'm making both a musical statement and also a somewhat life-related statement all the time.

There was the period of time when melody was so important that it was all there was. But melody is an inspired thing. If I know that I could be a melody writer when I want to be, then the next thing is, what is there besides that that I still have to do? One of those things is to see what there is behind the melody. Without the melodies, there's the potential for a melody. Sometimes, potential is much stronger than actually doing it.

One of the greatest fallacies in the laymen's concept of improvising is that it's something that takes you over: you're talented and you just go, man, you just play. It's a gift. That's maybe true on the beginning level. But nobody is really an improviser unless they

throw away all their position papers, all their theses that they might have come up with—all the things they use to justify their work—and consciously make the music do something. There are many ways for music to do something. Some of them aren't even musical in the traditional sense.

Years ago, someone once asked Andre Previn if he knew what I did, and his comment was that if anyone played for an hour-and-a-half straight, they're bound to come up with something [laughs]. Where's consciousness in it all? Also, Andre never tried it. I got him back. My dressing room was also his office in Pittsburgh at that time and I turned his clock back an hour. I thought that was appropriate.

JW: "Opening," from *Dark Intervals*, is a case where you delve into areas that are non-pianistic. At various times, you've done experimental things—performed abuses, is one way to put it—with the piano, as if to conquer its clichés. Lately, you've veered away from the extreme of hitting the piano or plucking strings. Is this piece an example of that impulse, in which you use the piano as an acoustic device?

KJ: Maybe. Those were expressions of energy. I was trying to let energy be energy rather than energy turned into music. It's like satire; sometimes, I'm tired of satire. If you want to say something about the politics of the United States, why not say it? We need it to be said straight now. When else would it need to be said straighter? There are a zillion clever musicians in the world and I don't think another one is needed. We don't need any more interesting modulations. We need something that says, "Hey, it's not about that." Those are like a coverup, in a way, for the fact that music comes from a deep place. Every deep place is like this scream. In the past, plucking the strings and the new record are similar in that way.

Since *Spirits*, too, I just don't feel like a pianist anymore. I don't have to try to use the piano to say what I hadn't said yet before *Spirits*. Now I'm just trying to live in the spaces of the music when I'm playing. In the past, it's been this kaleidoscopic thing—"Oh, man, it goes from Tatum to Chopin to Erik Satie to Poulenc, Faure, Debussy . . .," some of those guys I don't even like. That's enough of that for me because it was never about that anyway. I now feel like it's, "OK, take it straight. Drink this straight." If I'm playing E minor, I'm not going to play E minor with some neat fourths and fifths in it that make it sound like jazz. Then I might not think about what should come next. Maybe E minor is strong. I'm not going to try to nicen it.

JW: It seems that one major difference between doing the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and then turning around and doing "The Song Is You" or "Someday My Prince Will Come" would be emotional imposition. You put yourself into standards and pull yourself out of Bach. Is that fair to say?

KJ: Not really. It isn't what you described and it's more similar than you might think. When I start to play Bach, I don't decide ahead of time that I don't want to play this or that way. I start playing and through playing him, I see what I think this music means. In the case of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, I can see so clearly the process. The logic and motion of these lines makes beautiful sense that I'm just more or less following his weave. He's woven this thing and I'm reproducing it by hand. So I'm not restraining anything. The thing that you might think I'm restraining is fine. It's happy. It's not saying, "Well, where's all the input?" This is the weave, this is the tapestry.

In the standards, there's only a sketch, this single line with harmony. So I have to invent the rest of the rug. The emotional input has to go along with it because the trio is inventing it from moment to moment.

JW: Does your playing with the Standards trio satisfy your urge to work in a jazz tradition?

KJ: Yeah. It's not just that I have this urge hanging out when I'm not playing with them. That's some of it, but that's by no means the biggest thing. It is a communion between the three of us. That's something that's being lost. So, more than this wild urge to

play jazz that isn't satisfied unless I'm playing with the trio, I have more and more of a realization that no one is confronting this material freshly, or they're confronting it freshly with no knowledge of how to confront it at all. Without Gary and Jack, I immediately wouldn't have a trio. That kind of delicacy is more like a tribal language. We all lived in the same tribe long ago and we all spoke this language, and if we don't play it, the language will be relatively lost. That's the way it really feels when we're playing.

JW: I thought the American quartet had a unique fragile alchemy to it, which can make life difficult on a logistical level, but it made a statement at a time when jazz needed statements to be made.

KJ: It's true. I just want to put out in the open the fact that if the material hadn't been right, the band wouldn't have been a band at all [laughs]. When you have a band—unless if their reason for being with you is money—there has to be some music for them, especially players of the caliber we're talking about. So it was nothing that could be taken lightly. When I asked the other guys to write something for the album *ByaBlue*, man, did that take tooth-pulling to get material. I had the feeling this was something all along that they were hoping could happen. And then when it finally became possible, they didn't come forward, except for Paul [Motian], who, of all the people, was always writing tunes. I like his stuff.

JW: What happened to the part of you that, 10 years ago, was writing new music all the time?

KJ: It's there, but it isn't asking for media time. I am writing right now. I'm writing a wind quintet and a viola concerto, but that's slightly different. It does occur to me every now and then that if A and B and C could be figured out, I'd like to have a small group to write for. But, gee, we all like things [laughs]. For me, it's about listening and hearing and not so much about writing. Now that I don't have a band, my writing isn't something that has to assert itself.

JW: You don't have this gnawing gut instinct to write and therefore be eligible for immortality?

KJ: I think that anybody doing something in the arts isn't able to get rid of that feeling, and yet it's a complete illusion. I decided to confront it quite a while ago. This is why you don't see transcriptions of the *Köln Concert*, for example. Anyway, when I'm dead, they'll do it. I don't want to see it on paper. What's Miles going to leave? He won't leave a *Well-Tempered Clavier*. But to me, it's experiential quantity nine out of 10 rather than five out of 10 that when someone leaves, everything leaves with them. It's silly to think you engrave your work in stone when I'm sure, on your deathbed, you're going to think of something you forgot to put in this [laughs]. You've signed your name to this thing and yet you know it's not you.

As far as I'm concerned, *Spirits* is good enough. People who study a person who's dead—which they do seem to do a lot, there's lots of books out—will have to confront that album and my opinion of that album. I guess if I wrote something that I thought was monumental, maybe I'd want to have it published.

JW: I'm not thinking so much about a magnum opus as something like "My Song," which is arguably the most hummable of all your tunes. Doesn't that qualify as a different type of lasting impression?

KJ: If somebody can write "My Song," then either they had this brainstorm and wrote this deceptively simple piece that everybody likes when they hear it, or they know what they're doing and that's what they did. If I wrote that song—and I admit that I did [laughs] and I admit I like it—does there have to be a sequel to that song in my work?

JW: Of the works by living composers you've played—by Arvo Part, Lou Harrison, Hohvaness, Colin McPhee—there's an Eastern connection, either in origin or in musical syntax. Does that have to do with an Eastern sensibility of yours?

KJ: I think it has to do with a language that I consider more valuable than our Western language—more expressive and more valuable. It's because it's less and not minimal, you know what I



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mean? Lou is one of the last great musical personalities of that era—the Ives time.

JW: *If I could stretch a comparison, you're an individualistic musician who is literally removed here, as was Charles Ives. He was also linked with the Transcendentalists. Do you see yourself as a part of that philosophy?*

KJ: Probably you could put me there. I have my connections to that.

JW: *In terms of avoiding the madding crowd?*

KJ: Not in a crotchety kind of way, but I don't think even [Ives] was like that as much as everyone says. It's just that, if I've got as much work in music to do as I had in the first half of my life, there's no way I can do that with any extra distractions than I already have living this isolated. And there's no way I can bring to my work—live work, at least—the right amount of energy.

Really, I think most artists have a greater responsibility than most artists would like to know. And it goes far beyond the art they are involved in. It has something to do with perceiving more than they thought. When an artist is on the brink or could ever get close to showing that, what else is more important to a creative person than perceiving deeper or more of what they thought was everything?

In an age when there's no real father figure—there's no church saying this is right and this is wrong, and if they did no one would believe it anyway—and when there's no faith in teachers or a path that everyone would agree, "Here's a wise man . . .," all that's left is the arts. There's nothing else.

I was reading a book by Paul West and one of the characters is talking to himself, and says, "Life is a blur fit to worship." That's almost the best description of someone who had that innate, intuitive feeling all the time. It deserves more than style. It deserves that you have an attachment to something that is greater than what you see around you, because what you see around you didn't create what you see around you. It's not that simple. **db**

KEITH JARRETT'S EQUIPMENT

Contrary to the acquisitive nature of many modern keyboardists who scramble to keep abreast of technology, Keith Jarrett practices fidelity with his roster of instruments. He swears by Steinway pianos, using either German- or American-built models according to his musical task at hand. He also plays a harpsichord and clavichord built by Carl Fudge, from Winchester, Mass. Jarrett also keeps an assortment of flutes, drums, recorders, a King soprano sax, and a trumpet in his studio, should the spirit strike.

KEITH JARRETT SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

as a leader

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