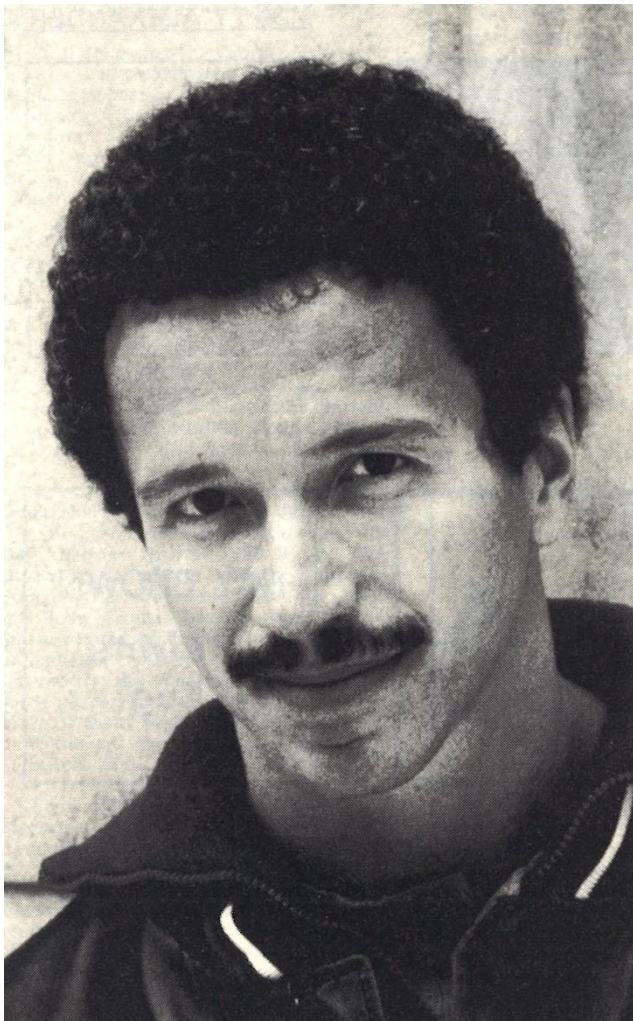


## KEITH JARRETT'S MUSIC

by Jim McLeod\*

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*ABC FM broadcaster Jim McLeod recorded this interview with the American pianist Keith Jarrett in Sydney during Jarrett's Australian tour in late 1978. It was printed in the April 1979 edition of the magazine "24 Hours" and is reproduced here with the permission of the Australian Broadcasting Commission and Jim McLeod.*



*Keith Jarrett: the independence probably continues between appearances because of keeping the energy available to me... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

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*\*ABC broadcaster Jim McLeod retired in June, 2004 after 48 years. He had fronted Classic FM's "Jazztrack", a two-hour program heard at 5 pm on Saturdays and Sundays for 28 years. In 2000 he was awarded an OAM "for service to the promotion of jazz music through media broadcasts and encouraging Australian music composition and performance". His book "Jim McLeod's Jazztrack" was published in 1994.*

**McLEOD:** In your music you seem to be very much your own man. I wondered if you were an independent sort of person with all things.

**JARRETT:** I don't know. Probably it turns out that way because of how much intense concentration and energy it takes to do a single concert but at the moment the independence probably continues between appearances because of keeping the energy available to me. If someone followed me around all day and saw what I did I'd tend to look very neurotic and have no logical reference point about how a sane person should take care of their day. But it has to do with keeping on hand a large amount of energy. I don't go for walks the way normal people do — in just one direction, and then left and then right. I might go back and forth in several strange lines and It's almost like a choreography.



*Jarrett: To me religion  
can be a good word but  
it's still just another  
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down the whole thing...*  
*PHOTO COURTESY 24  
HOURS*

**McLEOD:** Is your family important to you?

**JARRETT:** Yes, they're helpful in that they're a constant reminder that what I do in front of people is only a representation of what I don't do or how I feel about people that are close to me. None of it could be separated from the other part of it. I don't

consider playing concerts more important than being at home, but I can't do them both — funny thing.

**McLEOD:** Some of the very brief recorded notes that have been written on your albums suggest you may be religious. Are you a religious person?

**JARRETT:** Well, I could say yes or no. It depends on how I understand your understanding, or the reader's general understanding. To me religion can be a good word but it's still just another category which narrows down the whole thing — like the words with "ism" at the end, or "ist"- "purist", or "fundamentalist" or "positivist". I don't know, so I guess I would have to say I don't know. (laughs).

**McLEOD:** Can we talk for a little while about a couple of earlier musical things of yours. For instance the time with Charles Lloyd. How do you feel about that time now? Was that a good thing for you? Was it a developing thing for you?

**JARRETT:** Every time in my life has been and I would say that the Charles Lloyd years were no more helpful and no less helpful than any other time including the time I was playing in piano bars and weddings and I look at it all equally. I really would say that something is less valuable or more valuable depending on whether I remember if I was really doing it or not.



*The Charles Lloyd Quartet in Copenhagen in 1966: Jarrett says that the Charles Lloyd years were “no more helpful and no less helpful than any other time including the time I was playing in piano bars and weddings and I look at it all equally”...*

**McLEOD:** What about the time with Miles Davis? What sort of experience was that and how do you feel about it now?

**JARRETT:** I feel very good about it, but I still don't have any qualitative value that I could say I had.

**McLEOD:** How did you come to be with that group?

**JARRETT:** Well Miles was a sort of Dad to me. He'd always show up wherever my trio was playing when he had a chance. He'd sit in the corner and I'd walk past and he'd say "Why don't you come play with us?" I'd say "Well, I have a tour of my own" and he knew I wasn't doing very well — I mean I was just breaking even and being able to pay the sidemen. But eventually I had a break in tours and he asked me to record which I was really interested in then. I told him that I'd play with the band but I couldn't really give him a definite time.



*Jarrett (right) on piano, in performance with Miles Davis... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

**McLEOD:** The picture is painted of Miles Davis as being something of a tyrant — is he?

**JARRETT:** Not at all — I mean he respects people who respect themselves. If you were a sideman in his band everyone is getting paid different amounts of money, there is no set amount. You would go in and if you didn't say anything about how much you assume you should have, you would get this very small amount and you'd

keep getting it and getting it and one day you might say "I need this much money". If he wanted you, needed the music and you understood how much you were necessary, you could just about ask for any reasonable amount of money. But some people would say every week "You know, I really need some more, Miles" — they would be a very good example of the fact that that person had no concept of his own worth to himself. It's just a climbing scale, so in that sense I'm sure he'd seem hard. Then he would say "well, finish". So some people came away with this concept of Miles that he was a fanatic.



*Another shot of Jarrett with Miles Davis: Miles respects people who respect themselves, says Jarrett... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

**McLEOD:** Just following on what we were saying about Miles Davis and the rock thing and so on. I wondered how you felt about electronics in music?

**JARRETT:** I don't think about them! There was a time when I think it was needed for someone to say something about the danger of it all but, from observing my own audience, I don't think that's necessary now. I think the audience is hipper now than

the musicians and so they'll leave the concert before the musicians realise they're doing something that isn't really valuable.

**McLEOD:** There seems to me to be a certain swing back to acoustic things at the moment. Something that I've read a few times is that electric pianos, particularly, rob players of their personality — of their individuality.

**JARRETT:** Yes and it's robbing more than that. It's robbing the chance completely, not just robbing the possibility of getting the message through, but robbing them of the chance to know a little more how to express it — because they will go back to acoustic piano and not be able to get anything out of it, or they will sound like every other mediocre piano player. It's made into such a small decision but it's a big one! It's like sacrificing one whole set of values for another one — and you can't come back and take up where you left off because other people have been staying in it ... and those are the people that will be able to keep getting more out of that. It would be like striking out in a baseball game and wanting to replay that part of the game again a few years later just in case you hit it.



*Jarrett's  
American  
quartet, with  
Jarrett (top  
right), then  
clockwise,  
Charlie Haden,  
Paul Motian,  
Dewey  
Redman...  
PHOTO COURTESY  
PINTEREST*

**McLEOD:** You don't seem to have many changes of sidemen in your groups, there were the Impulse recordings with Charlie Haden, Paul Motian and Dewey Redman for so long and there's also the albums with Jan Garbarek. How do you choose sidemen?



*Jarrett (left) says that the European group with Jan Garbarek (right) “just kind of floats through everything... it was such a relief to let things float instead of having all this beautiful tension” in the American quartet...*

**JARRETT:** Well, all I do is eliminate all the sidemen I *wouldn't* want to have and I end up with two sets that work, that's as simple as it is ...

**McLEOD:** Are there others that you would like to work with that you haven't?

**JARRETT:** Players? Not off-hand. I mean I'm a little bit amazed that I actually found two sets of compatible people who don't play anything like each other and yet are able to make, with me, a very unique statement.



*French music teacher Nadia Boulanger: when Jarrett suddenly had the possibility of studying with her, he said ‘no’ without knowing why...*

**McLEOD:** Can you relate composing things to playing things and how important they are?

**JARRETT:** It's very difficult. It would be the subject of an entire long discussion and a good one, but if I started to get into it I wouldn't feel I justified the difference very well. The basic obvious difference is that the actualising of the music and the writing of it are not simultaneous with composing, and they usually aren't in most people's improvisation. The word "improvisation" implies to the average person that something is coming off the top of your head and it also implies that same thing in most jazz musicians actual playing. It comes off the top of their head and it's related in just a fragmentary way to some kind of centre in the music. When I improvise it is exactly the same process as composing, at least as my composing, taken to a million, zillion, times faster speed. It would be like a chess master playing, making a move every second or so, but the processes for me are the same. For someone else who improvised and composed they would be totally different because his improvisation would be coming off the top of his head whereas mine is not. That's why I get more tired legs than hands when I play because of crawling all over the place trying to get stuff out.



*Jarrett: I get more tired legs than hands when I play because of crawling all over the place trying to get stuff out....*



**McLEOD:** Did you have any formal training in composition?

**JARRETT:** No, I worked for several years trying to get a possibility to study with Nadia Boulanger and suddenly when I had the possibility I said 'no' without knowing why. I think it was just smelling the regimentation and categories that were going to be thrown at me which I had a glimpse of with theory teachers, that I didn't want. I would rather not be able to write music and not be encumbered with those things than be able to write music and not be able to get rid of those terms for the rest of my life. If when writing music you're supposed to be in touch with your deepest feelings then you have to work much harder for the opposite reason for the opposite goals than you would work for if you studied it. You have to work to erase all the stuff in between what you would write or play and yourself, and that includes every single term used so very often. People ask me how I play and I don't have the faintest idea. They'll say it sounds like three hands. "How could you be there in all those places?" But if I knew what I was doing I'd never do it. I would have thought that this was impossible to do just as so many people think it's overdubbing — it's not. It's just that I don't care if I can't play it, so I play it — it's not like "I better not do that" — I just have to do it.

**McLEOD:** Do you have any method in writing? Is it something you make yourself sit down and do?

**JARRETT:** I have to do that. I have to sit down and do it because I'm so involved in the flow of everyday life as music anyway, that to specifically do something with notes in a way is an irritant to me, because I'm involved in the flow of the air, and the day, and breakfast, and it's all music. It is almost a restriction for me to write music.

**McLEOD:** Do you live in the country or the city?

**JARRETT:** In the country.

**McLEOD:** Obviously by choice. Are cities something that annoy you?

**JARRETT:** No, I like some cities, but when I first had the experience of flashing into the city and knowing that when I was finished with the city I could leave, I realised that I would rather have my centre outside. You can always go in but I couldn't always get out if I was living in it.

**McLEOD:** A much better atmosphere for writing and thinking outside anyway ...

**JARRETT:** Yes, I've never stopped believing that things influence you whether you're hearing them or whether you're near them — I mean the proximity. Let's say you're living in an apartment building of 400 apartments and everyone's playing their record player. You don't have to hear any of those records to be affected by them — it's got to be part of the aura of the place and you cannot avoid it — so you can't find an atmosphere where you can hear yourself breathing in tune with yourself, only in tune with what all those 400 record players are doing. But it's so

unconscious that you have a feeling you're doing something alone and you're not. That's the thing that I wouldn't like about working in the city.

**McLEOD:** Keith, there are often cries of delight and joy as you're playing solo concerts as though you were surprised at what was coming out.

**JARRETT:** Yes, that's exactly what those are. Those are very high moments in the process of playing. They're not always high moments musically. In the listening later I always remember the feeling of being at that place which leads me to an interesting thing that playing and the music itself present two different, totally different experiences to me. It isn't like they are compatible as if I had a great experience that the music will be really great or that if I thought it was horrible while I was playing it that it will be horrible. There's absolutely no parallel that I can draw from how I felt on the stage until I might hear the music — so it's a really a delicate thing. I've stopped recording myself every night on a small cassette player just because it gets to be very dangerous. I'd rather remember the feeling of the experience than hear the notes and say "well, gee, I thought I was doing ..." What does it matter? I'd played it already.

**McLEOD:** Do you have special feelings about Europe because you must spend a lot of time there now?

**JARRETT:** Not so much anymore. I mean Europe was the place where I was allowed to play for more people earlier than any other place. I have to give them that credit — if that's what it is, 'credit' — for being intelligent or stupid I mean ...

**McLEOD:** Intelligent I'm sure. There seems to be a different feeling about jazz in Europe — for instance with Jan Garbarek and people like that. When they play as a group there seems to me to be a more collective feeling about the group rather than a number of soloists together. Do you think that's a fair assumption?



*The European Quartet, L-R, Jarrett, Jon Christensen, Jan Garbarek, Palle Danielsson...*

**JARRETT:** Yes, and it's open unconscious. If it was conscious it would be a much more valuable thing than the American musicians' high level of musicianship — playing together and all trying to sound like themselves all the time — but very often it's just like saying there's no perfect place, there's no balance of situation that presents all the best qualities all the time. But I appreciate that quality very much because I myself, as a so-called leader, wish very very often to blend with the other three musicians and that situation allows that because no-one is fighting with anyone else. Everyone's just trying to make the thing transparent and clear and feel good. It's a much simpler thing, that group compared to the American group which was considered mysterious and avant-garde and all that. The group with Jan just kind of floats through everything. I had the other group for 11 years or so, so it was such a relief to let things float instead of having all this beautiful tension, but still the desire to pull away all the time, and snap back, but not quite.

**MCLEOD:** To change the subject a little, I wonder if I could ask you how you feel about critics and about record reviewers?

**JARRETT:** Outside of serving a somewhat nebulous purpose I find them entertaining. I think that most of the people that would come to a concert of mine find them no more than entertaining also. I once made an announcement before I started playing a concert. I knew it was an electric situation where all the critics would be at this particular concert. I just didn't want to imagine them writing while I was playing so I said, "If there are any people in the audience who are going to write reviews of this concert, if you really want to write the review I would like to ask you to leave and write the review without hearing it. I won't mind — it won't bother me what you say. I just don't want to know that you are writing anything while you're supposed to be listening. If you don't have to write the review you're welcome to stay. I just don't want you to write anything down. I don't care what you write in your review. I don't care about the review. I care about what happens now and I just don't want to sit there playing the piano and wondering if you're bothering the guy sitting next to you who is trying to listen."

**McLEOD:** Did anyone leave?

**JARRETT:** No, they would have given themselves away. It was a perfect setup really. but it was so perfect that they couldn't leave.

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***Other articles on this site which may be of interest:***

*Eric Myers, "Keith Jarrett & All That Jazz" (24 Hours, 1982) at this link*  
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/ericmyersreviews19808783>

*Eric Myers, "Keith Jarrett Moves in Top Gear" (Sydney Morning Herald, 1982) at this link*  
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/ericmyersreviews19808784>