

NOSTALGIA, THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK, AND THE PIANO TRIO

by Ian Muldoon*



"The greatest misconception that white America has about black music is the ignorance of the magic of rhythm."

-Cecil Taylor



"So that's a phenomenal thing about this music. We interpreted this music beyond the wildest dreams of their composers, be it Cole Porter, George Gershwin, I don't care who it is."

- Ahmad Jamal

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*



"There's no boundary line to art".

-Charlie Parker

Nostalgia is real, and I'm a believer though not for such State-sponsored memories as the British Empire, or the exceptionalism of the USA which has been propagated especially since WWII. My nostalgia is for the joy of first encounters, whether it's the first time I held hands with 12-year-old Helen Nicetits; or ate my first mango in Manly's Embassy cinema, watching *The Thing From Another World* (1952) directed by Christian Nyby; or heard Bubber Miley on *East St Louis Toodle-Oo* (Ellington/Miley).

Typically, old people or even older people, will go on about the "old days" beginning with "I remember." Often such memories will be associated with money, and how cheap real estate was back in the day, how many chops you could buy for a shilling, or how far you could travel on a bus for a penny. Mercer Ellington wrote a song *Things Ain't What They Used To Be* (Ellington/Persons) recorded by his Dad the Duke, and by Charles Mingus and Keith Jarrett (*The Cure* 1990) which is pretty much a phrase which sums up the idea. *Sentimental Journey* (Brown/Homer) with vocal by Doris Day released at the end of WWII, became an icon of nostalgia especially for returning Allied soldiers.



Doris Day (right) with her longtime boss & bandleader Les Brown, who co-wrote one of her big hits “Sentimental Journey”... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB

But nostalgia is very much about smells, sounds, tastes, feelings and sights associated with events. I didn't realise my happy childhood was a poverty-stricken one until told it was so by people living in bigger houses with cars and tennis courts. Poverty alludes to deprivation and yet I believed I was deprived of nothing, certainly nothing of value, such as Helen or Bubber or a decent horror film. There is a very powerful connection between the place, time, environment, feeling, and circumstance on the one hand, and a compelling musical experience on the other.

In our tiny lounge/dining room we had an upright piano with the sheet music of the song *Sunday, Monday or Always* (Van Heusen/Burke) on the piano's music shelf seemingly permanently on display throughout my 1940s childhood. If I ever hear Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra sing it I recall not just the illustration on the cover of the sheet music, but the piano, the smell of Sunday lunch, the sights of my Aunt sitting at the piano, and the chewing gum stuck under the round table we ate from. Such is the power of memory and the sweet ache of nostalgia.

Such childhood memories were blind to the labour my Grandmother endured to keep things running, or that my pregnant Aunt needed the services of a doctor who undertook backyard abortions, or that our corrugated iron roof needed painting, or that my bedroom windows were painted black to stop invading Japanese bombers

from seeing lights in our home. The writer, academic and visual artist Svetlana Boym writes:

[Nostalgia] is a yearning for a different time - the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (The Future of Nostalgia, Basic Books, NY, 2001, p xv).

The different era of the 1940s definitely allowed plenty of time for dreaming and listening. One ten-inch 78 rpm bakelite record might be listened to hundreds of times. Childhood is also the time of discovery, which may mean that those first sounds of swing, or rock and roll, or church music, get enshrined in nostalgia to the extent that they overshadow later music of more interest or greater artistic worth. It may be mythology or sentimentality for the past, but some music lovers will revisit the past to give credence to memory. Some music cannot stand that revisit, but some music grows in stature. In the latter case, Duke Ellington continues to grow and grow; over the years the richness of his music continues to reveal itself, as do the works of Gershwin, Porter, Arlen and others when interpreted by jazz musicians. Some of Ellington's melodies are included in the Great American Songbook.



Duke Ellington: his approach to the piano favoured the percussive... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Ellington was a pianist, and the piano is the classical instrument par excellence. The voice, the trumpet, the drum are the jazz instruments par excellence. Yet the piano has been used by musicians to make much distinctive jazz: Erroll Garner, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Lennie Tristano, Don Pullen, and Dave Brubeck all approached the piano more as a percussive instrument, as did Duke Ellington. Some piano jazz is amongst the greatest jazz. Ellington's approach to it favoured the percussive even though his orchestrations, songs and arrangements supported strong melodies. Ellington was an original composer who rarely performed other's works. He wrote over a thousand compositions. Some have become jazz standards such as *Solitude* (Ellington/De Lange/Mills).

Understandably some younger musicians get sick and tired of the easy fallback onto the Songbook. They possibly see it as creative laziness. They may have a point - up to a point. Take for instance the classics Beethoven's *Fur Elise* or Vivaldi's *Le quattro stagioni - The Four Seasons*. If one hears either again in an advertisement encouraging travel to the wine region of South Australia for example, one feels like running screaming from the cinema.

Similarly, it may seem easy to fall back on a classic like *I Only Have Eyes For You* (Warren/Dugin) or *Summertime* (Gershwin) but the trick is to give it freshness, especially if there is any emphasis on the melody. But with a song like *The Way You Look Tonight* (Kern/Fields) which almost begs for an up-tempo treatment, the melody is not a prime concern. With a jazz standard like *Airegin* (Nigeria backwards)(Rollins) with its intricate harmonic movement, melody is of little concern, and an artist like Brad Mehldau gives it a 6.23 masterful treatment replete with rhythmic power on his version with Larry Grenadier, bass and Jeff Ballard, drums (cf *Where Do You Start?*, Nonesuch, 2012). Cecil Taylor in 1959 made *Love For Sale* (Porter) a percussive and rhythmic exploration with little melody remaining. So it's horses for courses - sometimes the reworking is magical, sometimes used once again as a vehicle for exploration, it is boring.



Brad Mehldau: he gives Sonny Rollins's "Airegin" a 6.23 masterful treatment replete with rhythmic power on his version with Larry Grenadier, bass and Jeff Ballard, drums... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

The most prolific uptake of the Songbook by a piano trio has been by Oscar Peterson who dedicated whole albums to Duke Ellington, Harold Arlen, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jimmy McHugh, Jerome Kern, Count Basie, Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, Vincent Youmans, and Harry Warren, firstly with a trio of piano, guitar and bass; and then with a trio of piano, bass and drums. The Count Basie Songbook is an interesting inclusion because elements of Basie's pianistic approach - timing, space, minimalism - are evident occasionally in Peterson's interpretations. Peterson, as is well known, could make an address in the phone book swing. A drummer mate of mine who witnessed a performance of Peterson's trio in Australia in 1961 still talks about drummer Ed Thigpen.



Peterson's Songbook interpretations are limited to around three minutes and don't stray very far from the melody. Some perennials like *On The Sunny Side Of The Street* (McHugh/Fields) which is usually done as a mid-tempo jolly piece, Peterson transforms into a sweet melancholy ballad. He transforms *I Feel A Song Coming On* (McHugh/Fields, 1935) recorded initially by Paul Whiteman, into an up-tempo rhythmic powerhouse of swing. He rescues others from relative obscurity such as *Lost In A Fog* (McHugh/Fields, 1934). To some extent it could be said his approach became formulaic - even so, it pays to relisten to Peterson from time to time to refresh one's sonic memory. Two particularly fine albums are firstly the one dedicated to Count Basie compositions, and the other to *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin/Gershwin). The melodies of the Songbooks are art works in the same way Mozart melodies are, and Peterson's interpretations are masterful.



The Standards Trio L-R, Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette & Gary Peacock...

A more recent substantial uptake of the Songbook by a piano trio (or celebration if you will) has been Keith Jarrett and what he has described as his Standards Trio. But Jarrett has used the term very broadly. *Moon and Sand* (Wilder/Engvick/Palitz) is hardly a jazz standard, although Alec Wilder did write the lyrics to *A Child is Born* (Jones/Wilder) which is a jazz standard. Even so, Jarrett has exposed some of the less well-known works of the major composers, such as *In Love In Vain* (Kern/Robin) from the 1946 film *Centennial Summer*, or *If I Should Lose You* (Rainger/Robin) from the 1936 film *Rose of the Rancho*. This latter song has been recorded by Geri Allen, Jane Ira Bloom, Milt Jackson, Chet Atkins and Grant Green amongst many others. Frank Sinatra and especially Chet Baker gave *I Fall In Love Too Easily* (Cahn/Styne) sterling interpretations which probably drove interest in it enough to enlist some of the greatest, including Bill Evans, Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and in 2007 reed player Joris Roelofs. But Jarrett has recorded and rerecorded Songbook jazz standards such as *Autumn Leaves* (Prevert/Kosma/Mercer), *My Funny Valentine* (Rodgers/Hart), *When I Fall In Love* (Young/Hayman) and *Someday My Prince Will Come* (Churchill/Morey) numerous times: all of them, it might be said, are worth a listen.

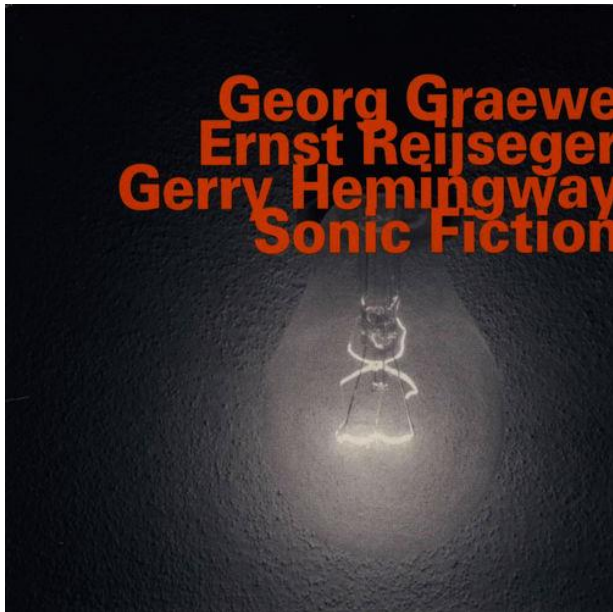
Songbook works can be used as vehicles by musicians, whilst others explore the art of the chosen song to reveal its true power. The structure and harmonic progression of *I Got Rhythm* (Gershwin) has been a vehicle for exploration and invention by jazz musicians since Louis Armstrong's 1931 version. As recently as 1997 it was given a makeover by Eric Reed (*Pure Imagination*). In most interpretations its melody

is unrecognisable but an interesting instance was the Jazz At The Philharmonic encounter on 22/4/46 in Los Angeles between Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker and Lester Young, when Young was cheered on phrase by phrase by an ecstatic crowd. Pianist David Berkman may do a solo take on *Embraceable You* (Gershwin) at an exquisite and achingly slow tempo, to crystallise each note and reveal the art of the music that may have been lost to cliché and licks over the years (cf *Leaving Home*, 2002 Palmetto Records). Other artists who have been drawn to its harmonic structure and dovetailing melody, include Ornette Coleman, Herbie Hancock and Geri Allen, enhancing its melody and form.



A Jazz At The Philharmonic concert at Carnegie Hall in the mid-1940s with saxophonist Lester Young at the front microphone... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Although the piano trio is now conventionally thought of as piano, bass and drums, the pianist George Graewe has led a trio of piano, cello, and drums: *Sonic Fiction* (hat OLOGY, 2007) recorded on 14/3/89 with Ernst Reijseger, cello; and Gerry Hemingway, percussion. This programme has four works by the drummer, three by the pianist and the longest work, by the cellist, is called *Fangled Talk at 19'42"*. It opens to tinkling sticks, joined by the cello bow hitting strings, then a piano note touched, a piano phrase, and deep bass piano notes as the piece slowly builds. Aspects of *Somnambulism/Sleepwaltzer* (Graewe) has skittering drums overlaid with a long improvised conversation between cello and piano. There



is little melody, complex rhythm and no swing. It's an effective fun piece with chattering drums and chattering cello and piano. The climax of the *Alien Corn Suite*, *Alien Corn III* (Hemingway) has continual high end piano effects, much like glass breaking. *Masting* (Hemingway) is an evocative and impressionistic sonic study of a yacht at dawn, with a slight early morning breeze causing creaking and moaning, interspersed by plinks and plunks, high pitched straining, accompanied by distant fog horn sounds.



George Graewe at the piano: leading a trio of piano, cello, and drums...

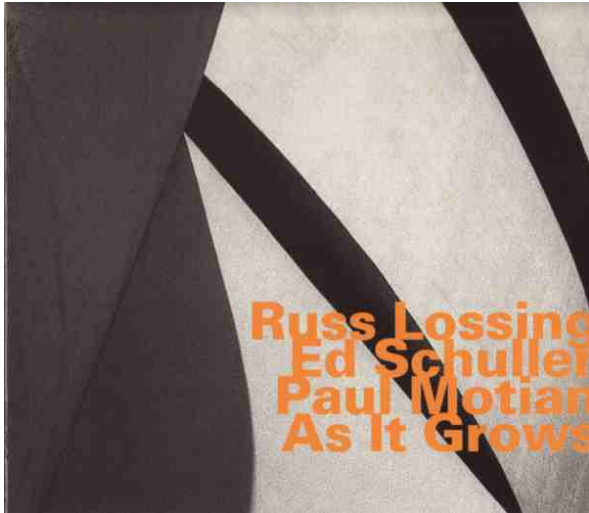
Russ Lossing leads a trio of Masa Kamaguchi on bass and Billy Mintz on drums. They have released at least two documents: *Oracle* (HatOLOGY) 2007, and *Motian Music* (Sunnyside, 2019). Lossing, 60, was classically trained from the age of five, and took up jazz at 13 years. His meeting with John Cage was an influence. He played with Paul Motian over a 12-year period. Along with pianism he is known as a composer, arranger, educator and scholar. Lossing is an accomplished and impressive jazz pianist as a listen to *Oracle* will attest. Kamaguchi's bass is a major element in the sound of the trio, and some works come across as two horns - piano and bass - supported by skittish drums. *Intermezzo* (Lossing) is one horn, the bass, punctuated by commentary from the piano and drums. *Beautiful Ugly* (Mintz) has Monkish, percussive chords whilst *Love and Beauty* (Mintz) is pensive and melodic. The sheer sounds of piano and bass are beautiful throughout, and the bass lines are an affirmation of Kamaguchi's artistry. This music is a million miles away from cliché and licks, and is impervious to boredom. Lossing comments:

Much 20th century composition is about interval play, especially Bartok and Schoenberg's. The 12-tone thing helped him to get his ideas onto paper, but it was always about the intervals. I'm a jazz pianist but my harmonic approach is based on this concept – finding new sounds and new expressions among the intervals. (Pietaro, John, 2/19, Russ Lossing. The New York City Jazz Record. p. 7.)



Russ Lossing: an accomplished and impressive jazz pianist...

An earlier programme of Lossing's is *As It Grows* (hatOLOGY, 2004) recorded in New Jersey on 16/3/2002 with bassist Ed Schuller (son of composer Professor Gunther Schuller) and drummer Paul Motian. It is more structured with all compositions by the leader, including the five-part *Suite of Time*. Some compositions resemble a conventional format where piano sets the theme, improvises and then the

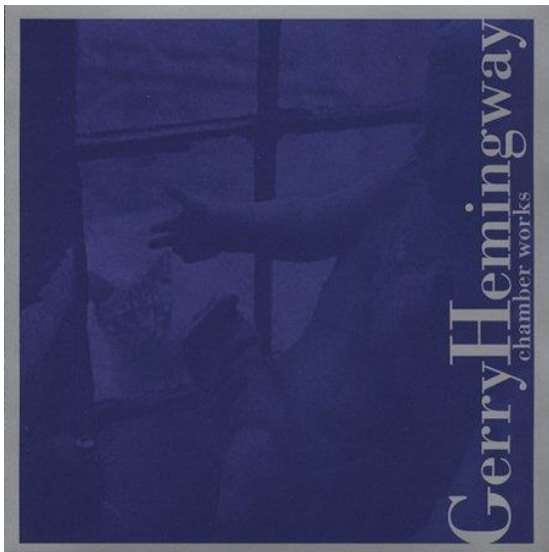


bass solos, followed by the drums. Such is the case with *Nagual* (Lossing). Some have a dialogue between piano and drums as in *Motion Units* (Lossing). Silence and drama are a feature of *Verse* (Lossing). *No Trace* (Lossing) rocks along with a strong rhythmic power. Throughout the acoustic bass, whether the bow is bounced on the strings, played arco, plucked or stroked, provides considerable colour, pulse and percussive effects to what is an extremely appealing musical outing by a “conventional” piano trio. Motian is nonpareil in his percussive contribution.



Paul Motian: he is nonpareil in his percussive contribution... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Increasingly, the lines between “jazz” and “contemporary” and “improvised” and “new classical” or “classical contemporary” become blurred, even irrelevant. There is a rather large leap between a classically trained pianist like Mehltau and his approach, which is clearly in the jazz tradition, and that of Lossing. Similarly, Dave Brubeck’s classical influences seem far away when encountering his music. Jazz musicians have always taken what they wanted or needed from any genre or culture or source including nature, whether it’s instruments, or compositions, or just sounds, but rarely do they take a hallowed classical form, like the string quartet, and use it for musical explorations outside the classical contemporary repertoire. Drummer Gerry Hemingway did so in 1999 to considerable artistic success with his work *Contigualis Part 1 and 2* (from *Chamber Works*, Tzadik, 1999).



Drummer Gerry Hemingway (below): taking a hallowed classical form, the string quartet, and using it for musical explorations outside the classical contemporary repertoire...



The quartet comprised four “classical” string players: Sara Parkins, Min-Young Kim, violins; Liuh-Weng Ting, viola; and Joshua Gordon, cello. Hemingway’s composition provides for four unaccompanied solos by each of the members.

A contemporary instance of a classically trained musician and composer incorporating the hallowed string quartet, is Paul Cutlan in his 2020 project *Living* (Earshift MGM). Cutlan, composer, leader, clarinet, bass clarinet/soprano saxophone has Liisa Pallandi, violin; Caroline Hopson, violin; James Eccles, viola; Oliver Miller, cello; together with established jazz/improvisation master Brett Hirst (bass) jazz musician, and composer of long forms, leader and artistic director, Gary Daley (piano) along with international percussive master Tunji Beier (cajon, kanjira, konnakol).

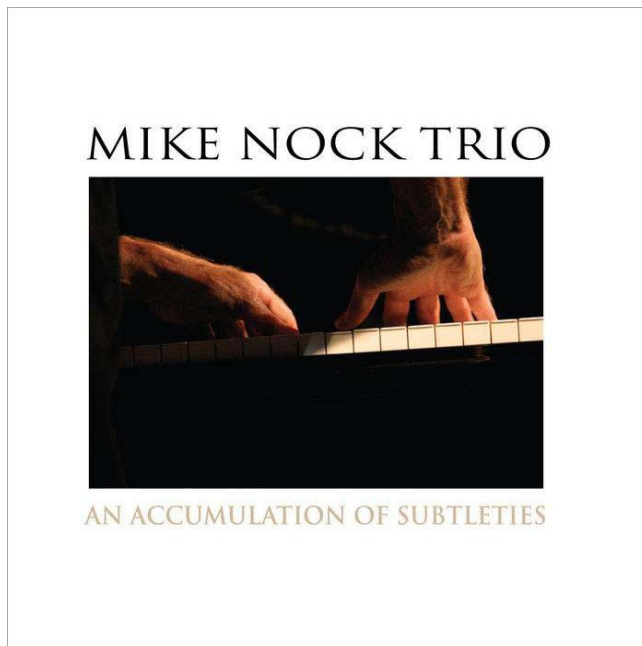


The Paul Cutlan String Project in concert at the Lennox Theatre on February 7, 2021, L-R, Liisa Pallandi, Caroline Hopson, James Eccles, Oliver Miller, Paul Cutlan, Brett Hirst ...PHOTO CREDIT RODRIC WHITE

The programme consists of five compositions and a five-part suite *The Eleventh Hour*. This last has many connotations and intentions including the reference to the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, signalling the WWI armistice. There is also the sense of the lateness of the day regarding human’s time on earth, with existential crises caused by humanity’s plundering of the natural Earth. The suite is an artist’s response to WWI warfare. Cutlan is a potent example of the technically accomplished modern musician directing his artistic energies towards music which may involve tackling an iconic Coltrane masterpiece like *Ascension* (Coltrane)

with established jazz improvising artists, or an original work outside any genre, using established classical instrumentalists in its performance.

An artist who has addressed the challenge of the classic jazz piano trio in an original way in a modern context, away from The Great American Songbook is Mike Nock. Melody and mood, rhythm even swing, are not far away in Mike Nock's approach to piano trio music. The double CD *An Accumulation Of Subtleties* (FWM, 2010) is an outstanding example of trio work both in a live and studio setting, with a programme of standards and originals on one, and a programme of more free music on the other.



Elsewhen (Nock), recorded live at the Sound Lounge, has the melody stated and restated, enhanced and built over the performance with a solid structure and effective percussive responses from James Waples. The title track begins minimally with piano notes at the upper end picked out, slowly, the bass enters then the brushes. One is attuned to listening with heightened expectation as the drama unfolds, piano repetition increases the tension and the mood shifts, with a long bass solo over a repeated piano figure. Nock's ability to distil melody in a minimalist way is admirably shown on the live recorded *House Of Blue Lights* (Gryce). Indeed with the free music programme the impression of a somewhat Japanese aesthetic is reinforced; by that I mean clarity, elegance, simplicity, beauty in stillness, and distillation of the profundity of musical sound. Clutter is entirely absent, as are showmanship and elaborate technique.

Nock is capable of pretty much any style as a witness to a live performance may attest, where a rollicking powerful blues may be followed by a delicate moody ballad. A work like *Joyous Awakening* (Nock/Waples/Waples) has the effect of immersing the listener in the creative process as if we are thinking and feeling along with the musicians. Echoes, beautiful cascading chords of sound, subtle bass and brushes enhance the arc of the music from stillness, to ballad, to mid-tempo joy and

melodic *denouement*. An impressive percussive work, *Makeru Ga Kachi* (Nock/Waples /Waples) has an almost military tone with its dark left-hand chords, dramatic arc, and repetitive figures. *Apotheosis* (Nock/Waples/Waples) is somewhat reminiscent of Koto music when Ben Waples opens with a run of upper register notes and melodic phrases, punctuated by a ting from the cymbal, and replies from the right hand of the piano. The bass is the centrepiece of this impressive example of percussive approach in a piano trio. This double CD is a model example of the range of possibilities of the piano trio, without a lick in sight, nor a predictable strategy of presentation. It's the elevation of the format to a creative and artistic high.



The Mike Nock Trio which performed on the double CD “An Accumulation Of Subtleties”, L-R, bassist Ben Waples, pianist Nock, drummer James Waples...

My attitude to the Great American Songbook as a source for performance is the same as my attitude to Chopin, Debussy, Schumann, and Listz and their *Barcarolles*, *Images*, *Papillons*, and *Rhapsodies*. When these latter classical pieces are performed by Samson Francois with his exquisite touch, elegant facility and refined intelligence it's like hearing them anew once again. It may be no coincidence that Monsieur Francois was a lover of jazz, whose work may have been influenced by jazz, even in a small way.

Artists such as Fred Hersch and Bill Charlap have not eschewed the Songbook, but use it as an occasional source for established art pieces. That's the challenge with classics: how to make them breathe again, avoiding cliché and familiar licks.

Hersch's piano trios have had a variety of bass players: John Hebert, Drew Gress, Charlie Haden, Marc Johnson, Michael Formanek; and drummers: Eric McPherson, Nasheet Waits, Joey Baron, Tom Rainey. He has released over 20 documents of piano trio programmes since 1984. Though he has composed over 80 works, on a typical programme he will perform a number of standards, as he does on *Live At The Village Vanguard* (Palmetto, 2002): *Bemsha Swing* (Monk), *Miyako/Black Nile* (Shorter) and *I'll Be Seeing You* (Fain/Kahal). This last, which Hersch regularly performs, may be seen as a sentimental warhorse, but Hersch invests the melody with considerable poignant power at a *grave* tempo, sometimes with a single note statement of theme, sometimes with high end counter melody, then tempo changes, some pounding climactic chords, with a tone suggesting 'remember the good times but it's over now'. Other favourites of his include *Softly, As In A Morning Sunrise* (Romberg/Hammerstein), *I Fall In Love Too Easily* (Cahn/Styne) and *The Song Is You* (Hammerstein/Kern).



American pianist Fred Hersch: he has released over 20 documents of piano trio programmes since 1984...

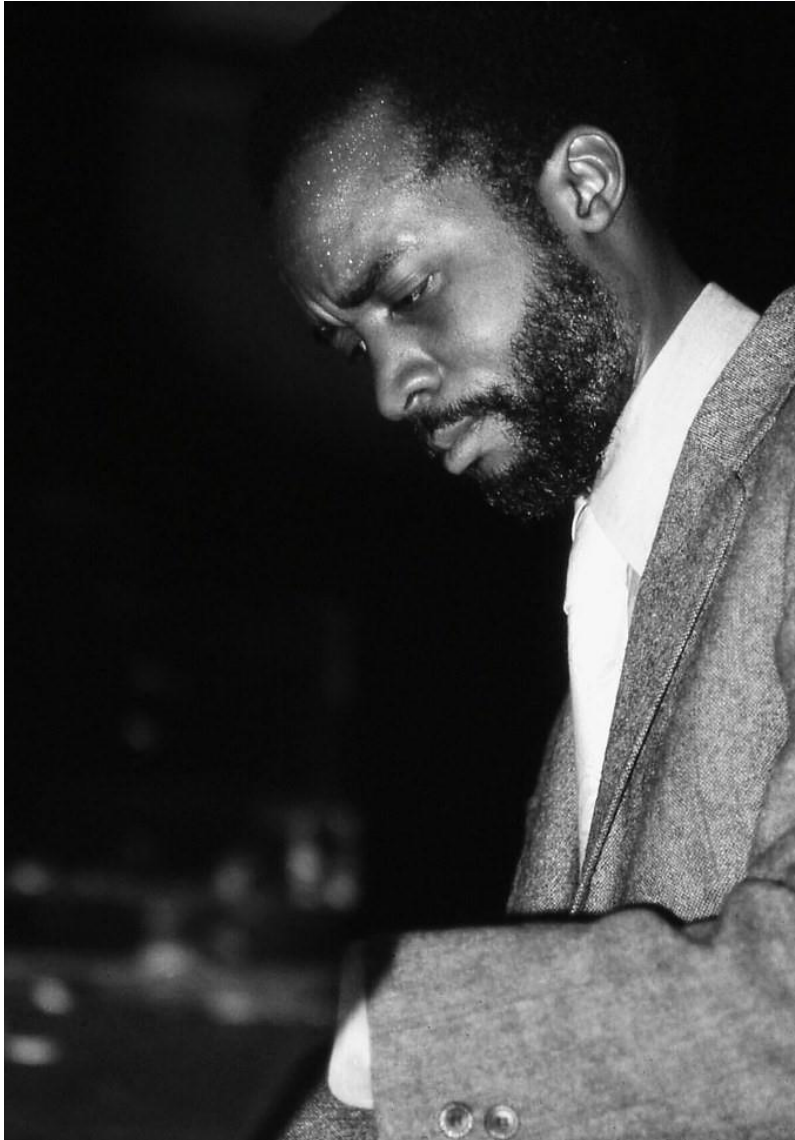
Unlike Hersch but like Samson Francois, Bill Charlap uses established classics as the foundation of his performances with his trio, which has consisted of bassist Peter Washington, and drummer Kenny Washington for over a dozen albums. *Written in*

the Stars (Blue Note, 2000), has ten standards and one by his Dad Moose Charlap called *I'll Never Go There Anymore* (Charlie/Lawrence). Some obscurities are resurrected, such as *Where Have You Been?* (Cole Porter) and *Lorelei* (George & Ira Gershwin), but the warhorse *On A Slow Boat To China* (Frank Loesser) is transformed into a rollicking rhythmic delight at a *presto* tempo, and *One For My Baby* (Arlen/Mercer) is transformed into a largo blues, especially noteworthy because of Peter Washington's bass work. Charlap has recorded *I'll Remember April* (De Paul/Johnston/Raye), *On the Sunny Side Of The Street* (McHugh/Fields), *Darn That Dream* (Heusen/De Lange), *What'll I Do?* (Berlin), *Soon* (Gershwin), *Dancing On The Ceiling* (Rodgers/Hart), *St Louis Blues* (Handy) and *When Your Lover Has Gone* (Swan). Sometimes it's evident that Charlap has carefully arranged a performance such as the opening track of the album *Written in the Stars*, Cole Porter's ballad *In The Still Of The Night* which has tempo changes and in the middle section, seemingly a *prestissimo* tempo; the bass player copes how?



Bill Charlap: he uses established classics as the foundation of his performances with his trio... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

But the pianist for whom my admiration remains most steadfast is Ahmad Jamal and his approach to the Songbook. This admiration takes into account the powerful interests of nostalgia and the power of the attraction of the Songbook. Interestingly, the great Miles Davis maintained use of the Songbook, even up to the beginnings of his second great quintet of Wayne Shorter, tenor; Herbie Hancock, piano, Ron Carter, bass; and Tony Williams drums. Later on he still gave '*Round Midnight* (Monk/Williams/Gillespie) a run, the most recorded standard written by a jazz musician. Barry Harris, Betty Carter, Sarah Vaughan, Dexter Gordon, Wayne Shorter, and James Carter have all recorded versions.



Pianist Ahmad Jamal... PHOTO CREDIT ALAN JACKMAN

Jamal (nee Frederick Russell Jones) started playing piano at the age of three. Formally trained from seven, he started playing professionally at 14. He worked with George Hudson, whose band included Clark Terry, and was in support of Dinah Washington. He worked with The Caldwells, a song and dance team who mimicked

playing instruments, and Jamal would simulate the bass and guitar in support. He worked as a member of The Four Strings. His three major influences were Erroll Garner, Art Tatum and Nat King Cole. He took a folk song *Billy Boy* (Public Domain) and arranged it so well that Miles Davis used it. Gil Evans also recorded Jamal's *New Rhumba*, using the original arrangement. Jamal formed a band called The Three Strings and in 1951 at age 21 he made his first trio records. Ray Crawford was on guitar and the bassists were Eddie Calhoun (1950–52), Richard Davis (1953–54), and Israel Crosby (from 1954).



Bassist Israel Crosby (right) performing with the Ahmad Jamal Trio. He died at the age of 43...

Crosby worked with Gene Krupa's Orchestra when 17, and was the first musician awarded a first in the category of bass in the *Downbeat* Annual Awards. He was a member of Albert Ammons' Rhythm Kings. He worked with Fletcher Henderson. At 16 years of age in 1935 he recorded the first jazz disc built around a bass solo, *Blues Of Israel* (Crosby/Krupa). He worked with George Shearing and died at 43. According to Jamal, Crosby's "intonation was impeccable. He had flawless intonation. He had a Kay bass. No great German \$80,000 instrument, a Kay bass. Now interestingly enough, they're trying to find old Kay basses. That's a big thing now (2010) - to find an old Kay bass like Israel used (laughs). Phenomenal player." (Interview with drummer Kenny Washington, *The Jazz Maniac*, March, 2010). Washington toured with Jamal in 2009 when Jamal was 79 years of age.

Jamal remembered melodies from a very early age and believed that it took years of living to really read them. He was watching a Ben Webster performance once when the tenor saxophonist suddenly stopped. “Why’d you stop, Ben?” asked Jamal. “I forgot the lyrics,” replied Webster. Jamal’s attitude to the Songbook songs of 50 years or 100 years ago is the same as his attitude to Mozart: Mozart is not old and nor is Jerome Kern. Music is not new or old, simply good or bad. As for the Songbook Jamal comments:

The phenomenal thing about American Classical Music/Jazz is that we interpreted these songs beyond the wildest dreams of their composers. They never imagined what Sarah Vaughan or Dizzy Gillespie or a Charlie Parker would do with “April In Paris” (Duke/Harburg). When Charlie plays “April In Paris” you’re in Paris in April. He had that kind of depth, that kind of reading. So that’s a phenomenal thing about this music. We interpreted this music beyond the wildest dreams of their composers, be it Cole Porter, George Gershwin, I don’t care who it is. (ibid, Washington).



Ahmad Jamal: “There’s a discipline in music”...

Jamal’s approach to his art was very disciplined and, in his words “I worked very, very hard on my little arrangements.” (ibid, Washington). All his arrangements could be adapted to an orchestra (cf, *New Rhumba*, Jamal, and the recording by Gil Evans). He rehearsed and wrote a lot. He believed there should be a rule about overplaying: it’s an occasional thing to do and should not be used to smother the music.

There’s a discipline in music. There’s an amount of showiness and showing off in front of musicians, which is always a mistake. So I kind of backed off sometimes and I think it’s a part of the discipline that I’ve employed through the years. I still

have that. Some people call it space, but I call it discipline... I think that everyone should follow at least some of the rules.” (ibid, Washington).

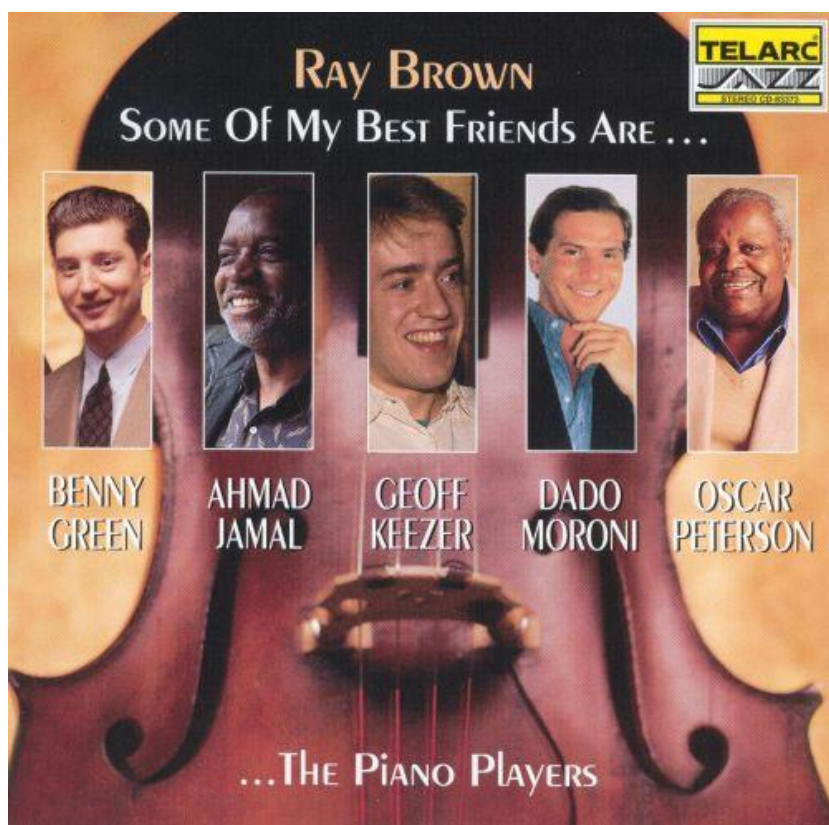
The reality is that Jamal did not use the Songbook classics as vehicles for improvisation but as the basis for reinvention, building and emphasis into artistic statements by enhancing the melody, underpinning it with powerful rhythms and striking harmony. Even in a popular song of the moment, a hit for Teresa Brewer (*Put Another Nickel In*) *Music! Music! Music!* (Baum/Weiss) he rephrases the melody rhythmically. In *But Not For Me* (Gershwin/Gershwin) there's suspense, lack of chords, notes missing, and repetition, making it a mid-tempo Billboard Hit and quite memorable. *Poinciana* (Bernier/Simon) more than most, emphasises the serious role drummer Vernel Fournier plays in the trio over the period 1958-1962. Fournier considers this performance his single best recording. He worked with Teddy Wilson, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Sonny Stitt, J J Johnson, Earl Washington and Stan Getz over the years, and after Jamal, worked for George Shearing. He is very much in the tradition of Jo Jones.



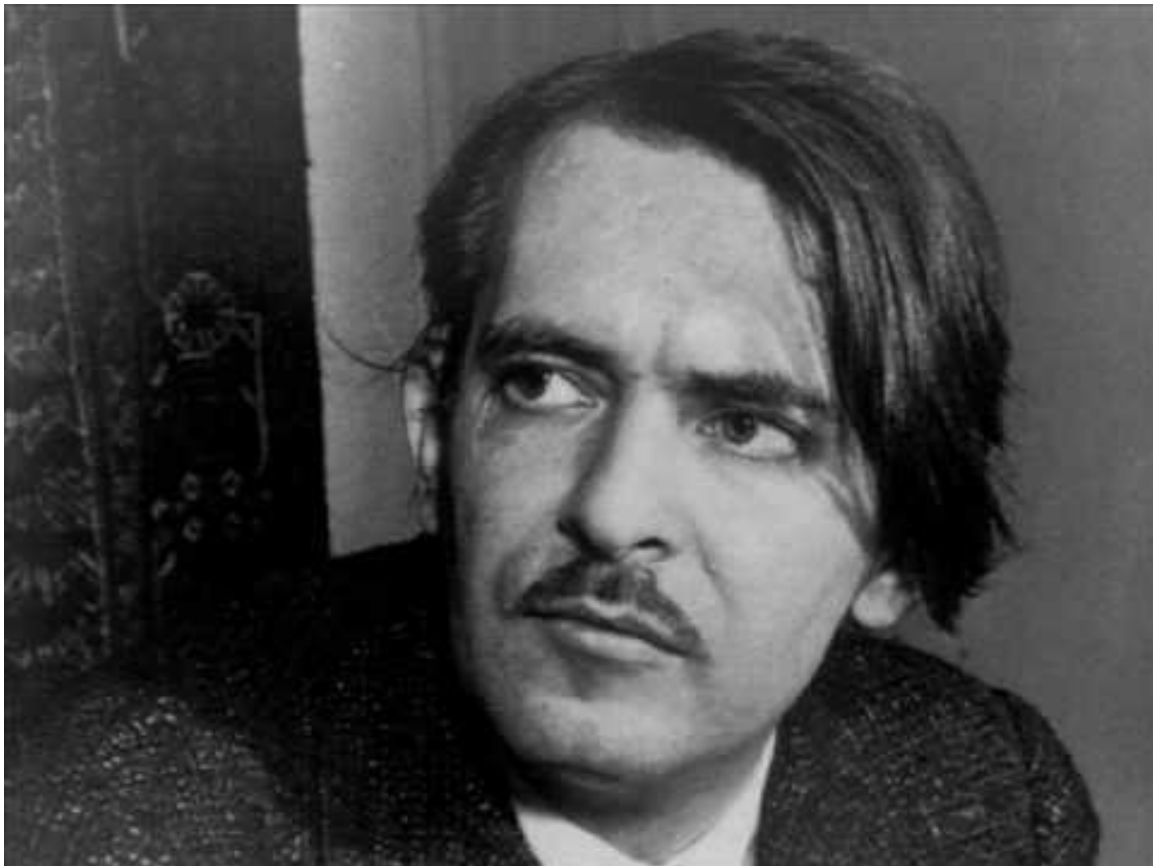
Drummer Vernel Fournier (above) played in the Jamal trio over the period 1958-1962. He considers “Poinciana” his single best recording...

Some of the Songbook classics Jamal arranged for his most accomplished trio of Jamal/Crosby/Fournier are *Surrey With The Fringe On Top* (Rodgers/Hammerstein); *Moonlight in Vermont* (Blackburn/Seussdorf); *It Might As Well Be Spring* (Rodgers/Hammerstein); *Should I?* (Brown/Freed); *Gal In Calico* (Robin/Schwartz); *Little Old Lady* (Carmichael/Adams); *Easy to Love* (Porter); *Speak Low* (Weill/Nash); *Tangerine* (Schertzing/Mercer); and *We Kiss In A Shadow* (Rodgers/Hammerstein). With a work like *Pavanne* from *Symphonette No2* (Morton Gould) Jamal makes it his own. He does the same with Claude Thornhill's *Snowfall* with strong even memorable melodies a feature of all these works. His performance philosophy was to seduce a listener with a familiar classic then take them on his personal musical journey, drawing out the original to maximum musical effect. In the beginning, he featured say 75% Songbook material and 25% original. Later in life he reversed that to 25% familiar and 75% original.

On the Ray Brown album *Some Of My Best Friends Are ...The Piano Players* (Telarc, 1995) Jamal performs *St Louis Blues* (Handy) with Brown on bass, and Lewis Nash on drums. The bass largely plays a melodic role and Jamal a percussive one with chord clusters and repetition, sometimes in the higher register. The tune is substantially reworked and not played as a blues. Jamal is 91 years old. He recorded the album *Ballades* in 2016 aged 86. Composer and saxophonist Ted Nash describes Jamal's contribution as a supporting pianist as different to the norm: "he makes you hone in." (*Downbeat*, March, 2010). Jamal may be a fine example of a living legend.



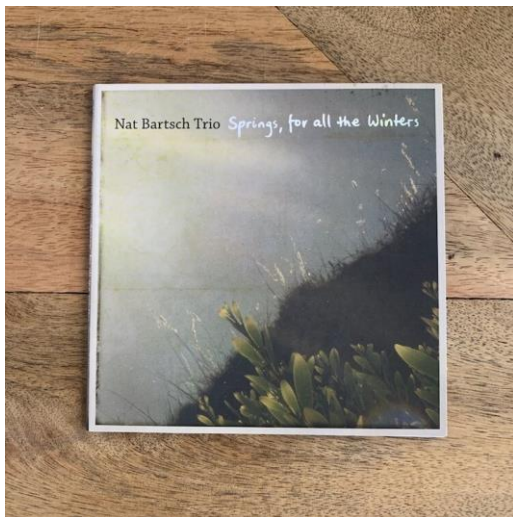
French musician Samson Francois (1924-1970) classical pianist, was passionate about jazz. His recorded legacy from 1945 (Chopin) to 1970 (Chopin) includes Debussy, Faure, Liszt, and Schumann. He considered his pianism somewhat “sentimental”. But his performances of his chosen repertoire seem as beautiful, as elegant and as haunting as any available. Because of the musical impact of jazz over his lifetime did this music inform his approach to the piano? Did he bring more of himself to his pianism so that the compositions of the greats were more effectively revealed? Francois was renowned for his ability to “connect” with a live audience, but the “magic of rhythm” was not a defining element of the music that he performed. Francois used existing art forms with jazz hints.



French pianist & composer Samson Francois: the “magic of rhythm” was not a defining element of the music that he performed. He used existing art forms with jazz hints...

It seems to me that the further jazz pianists have drifted from rhythm the less appealing their music has become, which is to say that the piano as percussion instrument has led to the most entrancing, most exciting jazz - in modern music, Bud Powell, Monk, Don Pullen, and Abdullah Ibrahim for example. Powell interacts with the advances in bebop drumming. Monk uses rhythm like a man walking with one foot in the gutter and one on the footpath and uses the space to dramatic and powerful effect. Pullen is renowned for his propulsion and forward movement; and Abdullah Ibrahim (once Dollar Brand) for rolling, rolling, rolling rhythms.

Australian Nat Bartsch is an interesting corrective to that view. Her piano trio work on *Springs, for all the Winters* (2010) is noteworthy for its light, even joyous tone, long sustains, melodic beauty and touch. Strangely and counterintuitively, I find the *Sire Of Sorrows* (Mitchell) which she arranged at *largo* tempo the most affecting performance on the programme. Six of the works are originals. It's true that her music at least in this instance has an ECM-inspired aesthetic, which has great appeal to many jazz lovers.



Nat Bartsch (below): her piano trio work on “Springs, for all the Winters” (2010) is noteworthy for its light even joyous tone, long sustains, melodic beauty and touch.



The ECM aesthetic is especially evident over recent times with trios led by Bobo Stenson, Tord Gustavsen, and Masabumi Kikuchi. But the aesthetic is not confined to pianists as the work of Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal, and Trygve Seim

attest. This music may be seen as anaemic meanderings along the Fjords with no end in sight, a passionless soundscape of ethereal melodies for possible use in yoga classes. If you want Debussy in the snow, why not go to the original by a master like Samson Francois? Yet, to generalise about the ECM sound is a silly exercise because it is so broad a catalogue. The very first ECM album was Mal Waldron's *Free at Last*, where the pianist in a trio format took a rhythmic approach. And Keith Jarrett's famous *Köln Concert* is a solo effort renowned for its forward momentum.



The very first ECM album was Mal Waldron's "Free at Last" (left) and Keith Jarrett's famous "The Köln Concert" (below) was a solo effort renowned for its forward momentum...



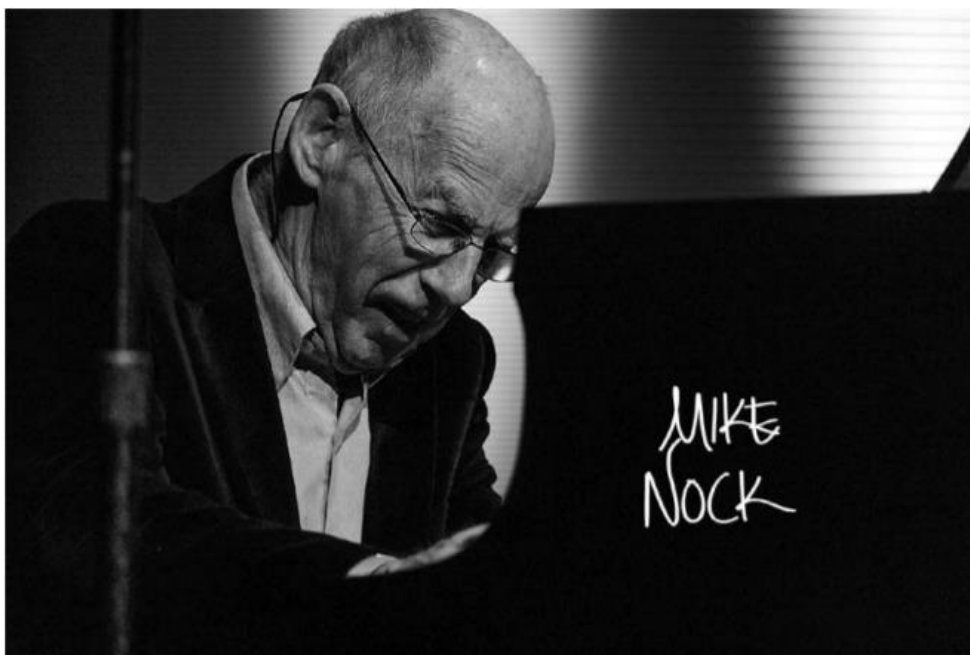
The latest example of a substantial corrective to the ECM “sound” is the piano trio album of Vijay Iyer *Break Stuff* (2015) which is in the tradition of the great Ahmad Jamal. It features three standards - *Work* (Monk), *Blood Count* (Strayhorn) and *Countdown* (Coltrane) - and nine originals. This is percussive, rhythmic, integrated music with powerful roles for bass and drums, featuring effective repetition on *Hood* (Iyer); melodic exploration and a melodic drum solo backed by percussive piano on *Taking Flight* (Iyer); and up-tempo percussive piano, over a bass/drum figure on *Break Stuff* (Iyer). Iyer’s piano is orchestral on *Bloodcount* (Strayhorn) taken at a largo tempo. If you wish to witness the brilliant possibilities of the piano trio in the 21st Century, this programme of work might be a first port of call. The trio is Iyer, piano; Stephan Crump, bass; and Marcus Gilmore, drums. This album is a useful corrective to generalisations about the ECM “sound”.



Vijay Iyer (left): his “Break Stuff” (below) is an example of a substantial corrective to the ECM “sound”...



In art, Beauty comes in many forms. Nostalgia is different to beauty. There is no ideal standard to which musicians have to aspire like the Greek idea of perfection. The beauty of humanity and nature has more to do with differences than with similarities - it is within people's differences that reside their unique attraction. It is in the music called jazz that those very differences distinguish it as the finest artistic musical accomplishment. To create at the level of Mike Nock's document *An Accumulation of Subtleties*, or Ahmad Jamal's *Complete Live at the Spotlite Club* (Argo 1958) or Lossing's *Oracle*, or Iyer's *Break Stuff*, is to witness that beauty in its most compelling forms - some created in the very moment, others created using an existing established and recognised art work, and made beautiful once more. These artists, using the grandest musical instruments together with some of the most ancient, manage to create some wondrous examples of human expression.



To create at the level of jazz albums by Mike Nock (left) or Ahmad Jamal (below) is to witness that beauty in its most compelling forms... NOCK PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY

