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# Hank Jones: Have You Met Mr. Jones?

UPDATED MAY 9, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Hank Jones

The Giants are getting clobbered," Hank Jones dryly reports, clicking off the TV. He is clad in a red terrycloth robe, enjoying some Sunday afternoon football at the Holiday Inn in midtown Manhattan, resting up for another late working night.

The gig?

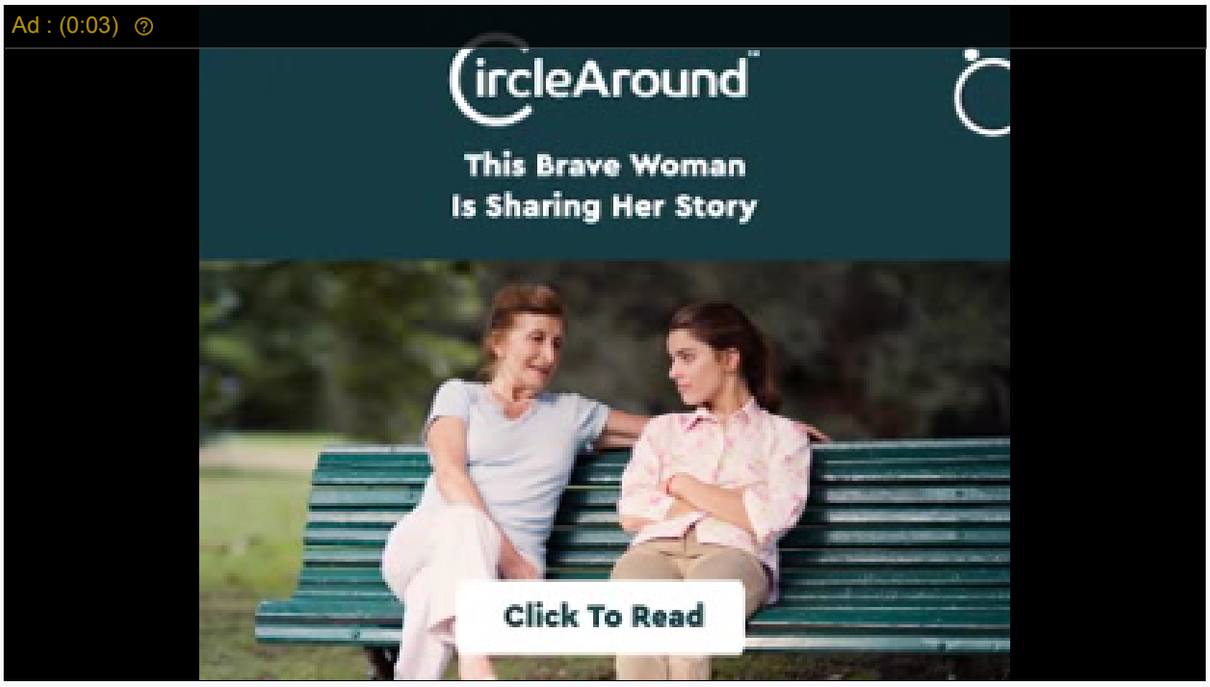
A full weekend-three sets for three nights, beginning at 10 p.m.-with 20-something guitarist Ilya Lushtak, followed by a Lushtak-led record date. For an 85-year-old man who recently underwent surgery for an aortic aneurysm, this might seem a bit much. But Jones, once described by the late Sir Roland Hanna as "the grandfather of all the piano players," seems unperturbed, even as he concedes that he's running on less than

100 percent strength. He's determined to remain on the scene, and if he can nurture the next generation of players in the process, all the better.

"Very fine guitarist," Jones says of Lushtak. "Good control, good facility, great ideas, very positive."

The shows are taking place in an under-the-radar establishment that Jones has barely heard of. "Fat Cat, I believe it's called," he says, referring to the sister club of the defunct Smalls. (Even Jones' manager had no knowledge of this booking.) The narrow room is adjacent to a pool hall of the same name. Like Smalls before it, Fat Cat has become an important, if unglamorous, part of the New York scene. On these nights the crowds are ballooning, and the space is nearly impossible to enter. Jones, almost stubbornly modest, attributes this to business-as-usual on a weekend. Still, the most vociferous applause is for him, and justifiably so: his solos are models of driving yet soft-spoken swing and refined melodic wit. The band is a heady mixture of old and young blood: Jones, Lushtak, John Webber on bass, Mickey Roker on drums and Frank Wess-Jones' friend dating back to the Billy Eckstine band-on tenor and flute. Audience members are squeezed against one another, and no one speaks a sound, every ear attuned to what's coming from the bandstand.

Hearing Jones in such a small, underground space is rare. One is more likely to find him farther uptown at Birdland or Iridium, or just east of Fat Cat at the Blue Note, where he celebrated his 85th birthday last August, in a special concert featuring nearly two-dozen guest musicians. But despite Jones' regal standing among jazz aficionados, he remains underappreciated and underexposed. He is a study in jazz industry myopia, plugging away for decades with a marvelously subtle approach that lacks sexy selling points or obvious signposts of innovation.




When he isn't working, Jones lives quietly in upstate New York with Teddi, his wife of 40 years. They inhabit a fairly large plot of farmland near the Baseball Hall of Fame. Their daughter, Cecelia, lives relatively nearby in Albany with her 13-year-old son, Christopher. "He's about 185 pounds and wants to be a linebacker," Jones says of his grandson. "He looks like one now, and he's still growing. I'm sure he's not going to play piano."

Of five siblings, Hank Jones is the eldest male. He was born in 1918 in Vicksburg, Miss., but his family relocated to Pontiac, Mich., near Detroit, when he was six months old. Jones is where the genealogy of "Detroit school" jazz pianists begins; it is he who paved the way for the likes of Barry Harris, Tommy Flanagan and Sir Roland Hanna.

Jones and his younger brothers, Elvin and Thaddeus (Thad), all rose to become jazz giants. Elvin, still quite active at 76, was of course John Coltrane's drummer during the height of the tenor legend's career. Thad, who passed away in 1986 at the age of 63, became better known for his composing and arranging than for his superb cornet and trumpet playing. Hank may not have enjoyed as high a profile over the years, but his career is just as storied, his mastery of the music just as profound. In fact, he was already working on 52nd Street in New York before Elvin and Thad had left Pontiac. According to Joe Lovano, Elvin was once asked what fueled his early interest in playing and composing. "I used to listen to my brother modulate," Elvin replied.

Hank and his brothers were raised in a strict Baptist household. “My father was an ardent, seven-day-a-week church man,” he recalls, adding a detail that would make William Bennett pause: “We couldn’t have playing cards in the house, no dice or anything like that. I’d been on jobs where if I played after midnight on Sunday morning, my father would come to the club and yank me off the bandstand.”

Some of Jones’ earliest gigs were in local beer gardens during Prohibition, where he played tunes like “One O’Clock Jump,” “Big John’s Special” and even “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” “That always felt a little odd because it was a spiritual,” says Jones. “My father didn’t care for that, and neither did I. I thought it was wrong to play stuff from church. But much later on, I played jazz concerts in church, and they loved it. So that changed.”

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Jones agrees that his early and prolonged exposure to church music left an indelible mark on his jazz playing. When he revisits spirituals in a jazz context, as he does on his 1978 solo piano classic Tiptoe Tapdance (Galaxy/Fantasy) or in duet with Charlie Haden on the bassist’s 1995’s album Steal Away: Spirituals, Hymns and Folk Songs (Verve), he is, in a sense, returning home.

Soon Jones began a stint with the territory band of Benny Carew (a forebear of baseball’s Rod Carew). He moved to Cleveland and then to Buffalo, where he got a close look at Art Tatum, one of his pivotal inspirations. From there it was on to New York, where in 1944 he joined the band of trumpeter and vocalist Oran “Hot Lips” Page.

In addition to Tatum, Jones was deeply influenced by prebop masters like Teddy Wilson, Fats Waller and Earl “Fatha” Hines. His New York encounter with bebop had a colossal impact on his improvising as well. But Jones did not become a bop player per se. His music remains an enigmatic and unpredictable amalgam of jazz piano styles. He may well be the only figure in jazz history to have recorded with Louis Armstrong (“What a Wonderful World”) and Anthony Braxton (Seven Standards 1985, Vols. 1 & 2 for Magenta).

Jones’ big-league initiation with Hot Lips Page included a tour of the South: “We played some places that only had three walls, and the piano was three steps below concert. You had to transpose everything up three steps to play with the band.”

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He went on to join Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) in 1947 and to tour with his idols: Lester Young, Buddy Rich, Roy Eldridge, Charlie Shavers, Flip Phillips, Bill Harris, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. “I was like this for a while,” Jones admits, his hands jittering above an imaginary keyboard, simulating stagefright. “But then you realize that they’re out there trying to do the same thing you are.”

JATP is also where Jones met Ella Fitzgerald, with whom he continued to work for several years. His recording dates with Sarah Vaughan also took place during this period. These stints cemented Jones’ reputation as a consummate vocal accompanist. Decades later he would cut a captivating album of duets with another of jazz’s leading female vocalists, Abbey Lincoln (When There Is Love, Verve, 1994).

Jones’ sideman resume soon grew to be voluminous, with two notable titles from the late 1950s being Cannonball Adderley’s (and/or Miles Davis’) Somethin’ Else (Blue Note) and Milt Jackson and John Coltrane’s Bags & Trane (Atlantic). But in 1959 Jones’ career took a turn when he joined the CBS network as a staff pianist-a job that he kept until the mid-1970s. “I must have played auditions for a thousand singers,” Jones recalls. “Sometimes I auditioned elephant acts, dog acts, comedians. The most interesting part was playing for opera singers. You’d play the arias and sometimes they’d want them transposed a step, at sight.” Jones continued to make records, however, and this required burning the candle at both ends at times. “I’d get off work and do an 11 o'clock date that went until one in the morning, then get up for a 7 o'clock rehearsal with Jackie Gleason or someone. It was rough."

Since debuting on LP in 1953 with Urbanity (reissued by Verve in 1997), Jones has amassed one of the most formidable yet unheralded leader catalogs in jazz. The '50s brought about a string of timeless Savoys that haven't completely made their way onto CD. The '60s brought Happenings, an electric harpsichord date and an odd bird in the Jones discography, featuring Oliver Nelson and Clark Terry; it emerged on Impulse while Jones was in the thick of his CBS period. The latter half of the '70s brought The Trio with Milt Hinton and Bobby Rosengarden, just reissued by Chiaroscuro and showered with deserving praise in these pages by Gary Giddins. Also during that decade came two extraordinary Muse dates, 'Bop Redux and Groovin' High, reissued together in 1997 by 32 Jazz as Master Class.

From the late '70s into the '80s Jones piloted an aptly named unit called the Great Jazz Trio, which initially featured Ron Carter and Tony Williams and went on to include bassists Eddie Gomez and Mads Vinding and drummers Al Foster, Jimmy Cobb and Billy Hart. (All this at a time when jazz, according to the Ken Burns historiography, "just went away for a while.") The Great Jazz Trio's recorded output is not easy to track down-surprising, one might say, given the names involved. But a new incarnation of the group has just surfaced on 441 Records with Autumn Leaves, a standards date featuring Richard Davis on bass and none other than Elvin Jones on drums.

The three Jones brothers have recorded together rarely, although they made an album in 1958 called Keepin' Up With the Joneses (reissued by Verve in 1999). The three also appeared, along with Frank Wess, on Elvin!, the drummer's 1962 Riverside debut. But among the smattering of other titles to feature two or more Joneses, none is more notable than Upon Reflection, Hank and Elvin's moving 1994 tribute to the late Thad, with George Mraz on bass. This was just one of a number of fine albums Hank made for Gitanes/Verve in the '90s. "We don't associate much," Hank says of his musical relationship with Elvin. "He has his own routine, does his tours. Most of the time he's out of the country. You're lucky if you find him in town."

With his Verve run at an end, Jones is making plans to record with two smaller labels in the near future, although he's reticent about revealing the details. He is poised for even greater visibility, perhaps, with his appearance on Joe Lovano's I'm All for You, an inspired ballads session for Blue Note featuring George Mraz on bass and Paul Motian on drums, due out this spring. Mraz has worked extensively with Jones in recent years, mostly in a trio setting with drummer Dennis Mackrel. Motian and Jones, on the other hand, had never worked together before. "Hank remembered Paul from all the Bill Evans stuff," says Lovano. "It was really beautiful, because every piano player since Bill Evans has had Hank's influence through Bill. But to play with Hank and Paul was like before Bill, you know?" Indeed, here is yet another instance of Jones meshing with players from all ends of the jazz spectrum. (He once paired Dave Holland and Ken Peplowski, for the 1989 Concord album Lazy Afternoon.)

Lovano tells of magic happening when he traveled to Jones' upstate farm to prepare for the session. "Rehearsing duets with Hank that afternoon was one of the highlights and thrills of my whole development in this music," the saxophonist declares. "Hank never repeats himself, and the first melody sends him into a beautiful meditation on the song he's playing. He reharmonizes every chorus. You have to be very free in the harmony to play with someone like him." On "Like Someone in Love," the album's only duo track, one can get a sense of what went on that afternoon. Jones, it seems, knows songs not only backwards and forwards, but also sideways and from every oblique angle.

Throughout years of hard and at times unrecognized work, Jones has remained a man with bountiful reserves of hope-and good fortune when it really counts. Doctors discovered his aneurysm by chance while looking at X-rays of an unrelated back injury. Surgery was unavoidable, and absolutely pressing. "I asked what my chances were, and they told me 70-30," recalls Jones. "I said, 'I'll take it!'"

There was more music to give the world; bravery was the only option.

"I'm just going to keep going until I get it right," Jones insists.

When asked for his thoughts on retirement, he responds, "I don't see any point. If you stop playing, you stop learning. And then your fingers fall off." *Originally Published January 1, 2004*

## DAVID R. ADLER

David R. Adler writes about jazz and assorted topics. His work has appeared in *JazzTimes, NPR Music, WBGO.org, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Village Voice, DownBeat, Time Out New York*, and many other publications. From 2010-2017 he taught jazz history at the Aaron Copland School of Music (Queens College-CUNY). In summer 2017, after 30 years in New York (apart from two in Philadelphia), David relocated with his family to Athens, Georgia. There he continues to write about music and perform solo as a guitarist/vocalist.


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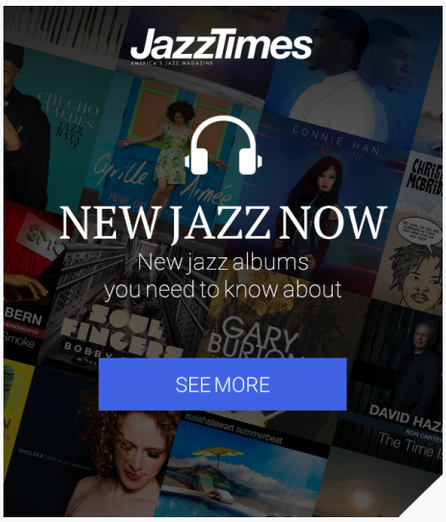


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