Ahmad Jamal - Marseille (2017)

01. Marseille (Instrumental) (8:34) 02. Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child (5:48) 03. Pots en verre (8:30) 04. Marseille (feat. Abd Al Malik) (7:23) 05. Autumn Leaves (8:49) 06. I Came To See You / You Were Not There (5:56) 07. Baalbeck (6:24) 08. Marseille (feat. Mina Agossi) (8:14) Ahmad Jamal – piano James Cammack - double bass Herlin Riley – drums Manolo Badrena – percussion Abd Al Malik (4), Mina Agossi (8) – vocals

There are few true jazz legends left alive now let alone still recording albums of the calibre of Marseille. Ahmad Jamal is one such venerable figure and the octogenarian (born July 2, 1930) has recorded an album of consistent brilliance. Jamal prefers to refer to his playing as American classical music rather than jazz and he's been regarded as a "mainstream" pianist but to stylistically stereotype him in this fashion is to do him an injustice.

The title track is afforded three different versions, the first being a mesmeric modally-inspired instrumental foray. The title is also a paean to a country that has enthusiastically supported Jamal throughout his long career culminating in the French government awarding him the prestigious Chevalier De L'Ordre Des Arts Et De Lettres in 2007. The album itself was recorded in Malakoff, a suburb on the outskirts of Paris.

It's well-known that Miles Davis was a fan of Jamal's and admitted to being influenced by the pianist. Miles and Jamal became friends in the 1950s and Davis recorded Jamal's "Ahmad's Blues" on Workin' and "New Rhumba" on Miles Ahead. So on one level, it's not too surprising that on "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child" Jamal includes a funky quote from Davis's "Jean Pierre" from We Want Miles, released in 1982. But on another level the inclusion of this vamp, which bookends the track, demonstrates how versatile is Jamal's approach, and how a standard can be completely transformed so seamlessly.

The quoting continues on "Pots En Verre" with a repetition of two tantalisingly familiar chords from Lee Morgan's "The Sidewinder." The French rapper Abd Al Malik contributes tersely spoken words in French on the next beguiling version of "Marseille" on which Jamal evinces an alternative chordal interpretation.

"Autumn Leaves" is given a rich makeover, with percussionist Manolo Badrena and drummer Herlin Riley adding a Latin-esque feel and all underpinned by James Cammack's resonant double bass. There's even a micro-quote from Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments" here too. The languid "I Came To See You / You Were Not There" and the more vibrant "Baalbeck" almost conclude this set but for the addition of a sumptuous third version of "Marseille," adorned by Mina Agossi's mellifluous vocals.

It's undoubtedly Jamal's use of space and deft light and shade which characterise his playing and this proves that frenetic pyrotechnics are not necessary to make a huge impact on an audience.

This extraordinarily beautiful album, simultaneously released on CD and double vinyl, demonstrates how age alone does not diminish an artist's musical ability and creativity. This superb album's appeal will be undoubtedly very wide indeed. ---Roger Farbey, allaboutjazz.com

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