

Keith Jarrett Interview Conducted By Stuart Nicholson: February 2009

Q: *Yesterdays* was recorded in 2001 and to me it's at once intense, creative yet playful and seems to encapsulate your remarks in the *LA Times* that jazz musicians don't have to break down doors all the time. So what is your rationale when you select pieces to perform with the trio?

KJ: Rationale? I don't have one, I don't have a conscious concept. Just to give you an example. *Tribute* [the double CD set of standards – plus two Jarrett originals – recorded October 15, 1989 at Philharmonie, Köln] was a tribute to Nancy Wilson, Charlie Parker, Coltrane and people like that in jazz. There was quite an in-depth review of it, I'm not sure if it was a German reviewer or could even been British, anyway, it was very in-depth and he had developed this theory that as we were playing each song we were quite aware of who the recipient of this tribute was. I had to debunk his whole theory when he talked to me a little bit, I said not only have you developed this theory, painstakingly probably, and worked it out but I have to tell you that you're absolutely not correct. There was no thought of these singers and players at the time we did the playing – that came after the fact when I realised there was a connection between the songs and what someone had done, for example, when I think of "All the Things You Are" I think of Sonny Rollins, and so on. So there is no rationale, no game plan with the trio.

Q: So you just hit on songs?

KJ: That's about as in-depth as you get! I hit on them, like baseball or something. For example, if you take *Yesterdays*, if I were to analyse the different facets of it and say what was the rationale for those particular choices I couldn't – I remember we were coming out of three or four concerts that were all free music [with the trio], and then we did a soundcheck in the hall [April 30, 2001 at Metropolitan Festival Hall, Tokyo] and it seemed like songs would

work better than free stuff and we had not played any tunes at all on this trip, yet. So one of the things you hear [on the album] is relief, we were just relieved not to have to be in charge of every split second, so answering your original question, we didn't feel we had to push the envelope as we had been pushing the envelope at those other four concerts for every split second. Rather than rationale there are reasons that provoke us into saying yes, this works, no this doesn't work, this hall is good for this, it's not good for this, and then the music arrives in a certain package. For example, the whole music of *The Survivor's Suite* [recorded Ludwigsberg, Germany April 1976 and released by ECM] was written – and this is something that's perhaps not known widely at all – that suite of pieces was written specifically for Avery Fisher Hall in New York, because I knew we were going to play there, I think it was opposite Monk as part of the festival. I knew from playing in Avery Fisher Hall many times the sound was not precise enough onstage to play fast tempos, [the sound] got blurred – so I decided to write the music for that evening. I felt it was important as an evening of music and that's the first place we played it and it was written for that hall and then it became something we did at other places. So there was a rationale to that, but I think very few people would ever say, “Would you conceive, Mr. Jarrett, of writing for a specific hall?” I probably would say, “No.” But the answer lies in the fact that I knew the hall to be very poor for certain kinds of things and if you listen to *The Survivor's Suite* you'll notice there are no fast tempos.

Q: Interesting. Religious music, of course, is conceived entirely with the acoustic space in mind.

KJ: That's right. Anything on that record was “free” speed, not tempo speed, so that was that story. I think that explains more or less how we go about this stuff.

Q: *Yesterdays* – you mention you did four free concerts beforehand, but 2001 was actually a very rich period for the trio [four albums were recorded from the trio's 2001 tours]

KJ: Ah, yes. I was the first person to notice, of course, because I have a list “must come out” releases. This tape must come out, this tape – forget it, we don’t need this. So I had recordings from all over the place from a few different years, and I made list on a couple of sheets of paper in case my plane went down or something silly like that, and someone would see that and know what I wanted next. And it’s a funny thing. I noticed that in the end, although I was choosing from over several years, I kept choosing pre-9/11 on the year 2001. And I have no explanation for that.

Q: Well, I was going ask if the inner man was celebrating putting that awful illness behind you [Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, popularly known as ME, which afflicted Jarrett from the autumn of 1996 for over two years].

KJ: Yes. That could be. If that’s true then there’s something going on now too. It started at the end of [2008] at Carnegie Hall with the trio and everything jumped, skyrocketed!

Q: Well, I hope it’s being documented. Can we go back to the beginning of the trio, and the ECM three CD box set *Setting Standards* which documents its beginnings [*Standards Vol. 1* and *Standards Vol. 2* and *Changes* recorded January 1983]. What was the ethos of the trio then, and how it has evolved?

KJ: Well, interestingly it evolved all by itself, as long as we keep the same principals just not possessing the music as though it’s ours and just going in as a player in a group. It evolved like that, it depends on the purity of Gary and Jack and I at that time, and that’s all it depends on – plus our health of course – but really the purity of intent. There’s not another group that has this MO, at least I’ve never heard of one, but it’s not that we’re casual, we’re the exact opposite. I’m not hearing any more, like I heard ten years ago, “Why are they still playing standards?” I’m not hearing this from critics. I’m seeing them saying just listen to them playing, not so much “that’s the third time they’ve played this song,” but the fact we’re changing without any preconceived notion of what kind of that change should be.

Q: Equally, the Standards Trio has always had its alter ego, The Changes Trio

KJ: Yes

Q: And later albums such as *Inside Out* [recorded at London's Festival Hall in July 2000] and *Always Let Me Go* [the two CD set recorded in Japan in April 2001] prompt me to ask about this aspect of the trio's performances. Sometimes you impose form, sometimes the roles of the instruments change and I was wondering if you get the same degree of fulfilment playing in the freer realm as you do playing – for want of a better word – inside.

KJ: Well, we're a little bit busier, so it's a little harder to feel fulfilled! But Gary told me something interesting after he heard *Always Let Me Go*, he said, "Really this is the only group I've ever played with" – and he's had a lot of free experience, he was with Albert Ayler and playing with a lot of guys playing free music – he said, "this is the only group where it constantly changes inside of the freedom and it's not boring. It isn't like you start out in high gear and that's where you stay and no colours ever shift." But it's not something I'd want to do constantly, because it's like going outside your planet, at some point you've got to come back.

Q: Can you expand on how you collectively approach this area of improvising?

KJ: Well, to me it's like applying the solo gestalt to three people, and trying to lead, without being a leader – if the bottom feels like it's going to fall out finding some little spice to throw up in the air, so there is some element – it isn't typical free music, it's more like three stream-of-consciousness's. I'm more in charge when we're playing free stuff than when we're playing tunes because I've had such an enormous amount of experience playing from zero in solo concerts, so I know I'm hearing the guys looking to me for little road signs, it's good because what it means is those are the moments when the music does shift and the colour does change, otherwise it

would be just be like sweating and playing triple forte! Maybe Jack starts it by playing something and I have to find a way in, and since I have the only instrument that has to do with harmony per se, I'm the one who has to deal with structure also, they don't necessarily. All through my jazz listening life, I was always more interested in listening to piano-less groups than with piano, so its hard to be a pianist in a free situation because the instrument itself is looking at you and saying "Why aren't you using combinations of my notes?" So it's a kind of give and take, a lot of free players will probably not consider those albums really free music, but my answer to them, if they were ever to say that, is the answer I gave someone when I gave a Bach transcription as an encore for a solo concert. He came backstage and decried the fact that it was not completely improvised, and I said "Yes it was." And he said, "No it was a Bach piece." And I said, "But I didn't plan on playing it!"

Q: Touché! One important aspect of your playing is your respect for melody, both written and improvised. I wonder if you could let me have your perspective on the importance of melody, which, to me at least, is often being lost in jazz in favour of patterns.

KJ: Yes, I agree. I would say the "cleverness" syndrome has taken the place of melody. It's like everyone has come down with this terrible disease in jazz. First of all you are always expected to do your own material, which is a strange thing to do if you're a poor composer but a great player. If you are a great player and luckily you know what great melody is about things can happen that can't happen otherwise. There was a class on melody when I went to Berklee school, I didn't learn anything in that class but I thought it was an immensely innovative idea. I already felt I knew what melody was and what good melody was. It was held by a guitarist and I can't think of his name, I think he was from the South West, the deal was you'd go in and it was like a melody class, melody writing – and it was like Jeez, what's this about? And that was exactly the point, it was boring in its concept but it provoked the awareness that – in other word, if you need to be made conscious of something the only way to do that is by finding how bad you are at it. One of the first exercises we were given was eight bars and you

could only use whole notes and half notes and you're supposed to write a melody and bring it in. It's almost what I'd tell piano students, they'd play a lot of licks, I could tell they were not coming from them, they were coming from mechanical patterns. And they would say, "How do you do what you do?" And I would say, "Don't even ask that question, ask yourself why do you do what you do? Do you like what you just played or not?" "Well no. Not really" And I'd say, "Okay, I want you to play a fifth in your left hand, C and G, any fifth, anywhere, in your left hand. And just wait and if you don't hear anything in your head to play don't start playing and when you do start playing, if it's not something you like, stop." And they come back and say, "You know, I never discover anything I like and I wait forever and nothing happens and nothing goes through my head." And I'd go, "Okay, that's the first stage. Keep doing it." With melody Ornette is a good example, there's naivety in his music, but there's something natural there that you can't teach. It's either there or it's not, and I'm not sure there are rules, like there are in architecture. If you graph a good melody it probably looks good as a graph. I'm working on the Bach violin concertos now to play with a violinist and some of the slow movements, if you just look at [the sheet music] the intervallic motion and the immense amount of juice that's there is in the shapes, something very, very meaningful in the shapes even on the page. When I look at music, I can tell by looking at it if there is anything to do with melody in this music, because there should be a shape there that gets you intrigued, and it has to be asymmetrical, a really good melody stands out as a perfect thing, and it couldn't be bettered. If it can't be bettered then it's a good melody. And then there's the harmony. It depends on how a person writes, but what I used to do was I'd have the melody start on paper, I just was so involved in getting it down the way I heard it I'd just write a bass note just so I'd know what the contrapuntal relationship is. I would say that people who write using chords and melody as a guide are most of the time going to be bad melody writers. Because chords are vertical and melodies are lateral so if you start thinking of chords too early in the writing of something, you may overlook the one great thing you could have come up with in the melody. And then there is this mystery place in the melody where you don't know what chords should be there, and that's what

you have to discover later. You just have to come up with voice leading or some chordal – there’s a piece I wrote called “So Tender,” which is on a couple of our albums, the trio recorded it, and I did it with Airtio and when I did it with Airtio, Ron Carter was playing bass and it was in the studio and he looked at the music and said, “This can’t be right.” And I said, “What do you mean Ron?” And he said, “Well, the second eight bar phrase starts with a dominant chord,” and I said, “That’s right Ron.” He said, “How can that be? It’s just not...” He was thinking from his rule book. I said, “Ron, wait until you hear the whole piece, you’re looking at the chords. Wait until you see how the melody and chords connect, and then tell me it’s wrong.” And he didn’t say a word after that! It’s a matter of how the multiplicity of elements connect that makes the melody and the voices below the melody make perfect sense and that is something you might never guess from only looking at one of those elements.

Q: One of the problems for pedagogy, of course, is that there is no such thing as a definition for “a beautiful melody.”

KJ: Many, many great composers – let’s say Prokofiev, for example. An incredible melodist, he strings the melody out over a longer period of time than you would expect and because of that you become intrigued. Like, we thought this would resolve itself last week! But it’s still going on and there are still more chords to be found there, more groundwork that somehow makes sense. That’s a certain kind of magic and I don’t think you can teach it.

Q: I think so too. Today you have to have the instant melody, or instant hook, for instant gratification. We have spoken in the past about Mozart, who was a supreme melodist

KJ: Yes

Q: And I wonder how his concertos have helped in terms of touch and expressivity in your jazz work, the transferability of skills from one discipline to another.

KJ: Well, if you take a slow movement in a concerto by Mozart, almost any one! There are phrases that are so simple and so profound at the same time that you realise that if you can apply this to a song – I discovered something recently that took me my entire life to get to this realisation, I'll tell you what this was in a second – if you take this concept that maybe you have learned from playing Mozart where you realise it can sound like nothing or it can sound like the most beautiful thing in the world, and it depends on your touch and phrasing on, let's say three notes that are basically quarter notes ascending in a, let's say, a C# minor triad up to the octave. If you discover the secret in that music, its meaning, you can apply it to other things. So if I want to play a ballad and I know the words, then I can – I discovered this recently – I can actually do more to the song and the meaning of a song on piano than a singer could do if they are singing it and using the words. For example, it's hard to know what to do with this one phrase in "Over the Rainbow" where you have to go down low and you say, [sings] "Birds fly over the rainbow," how do you get anything out of "birds" as a singer? And you have to go down for a low note! But on piano, since you're doing an instrumental version you can actually continue to keep the whole meaning of the song intact while you're playing the note that would be the word "birds." No matter how good the singer, they're always going to be stuck with the sound [of "bird"], as an instrumentalist you're not stuck with that sound, so the integrity can come closer to the song than anybody could sing it. So I guess one of the things I took from Mozart is that it further refined my touch to the point where I could play "words" without having to say "birds" or, say, "if." It's hard to sing "if" as anything other than a short sound, but on piano you can make "if" mean something – the meaning of "if," not the sound of "if" – and I just discovered that, let's say three, four months ago. I was doing a private project for myself in the studio, trying to get into a state of mind that would provoke – I was intending a state of mind, let's put it that way – and I realised that much of what I was doing was from pieces I had heard sung, so I knew the words. So I'm not playing these songs like a jazz musician wanting to play jazz on them, this was an attempt at playing them even straighter than *Melody at Night, With You*, for example [the 1999 album which marked Jarrett's return to

performing after suffering the debilitating effects of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome] and have it be the loss of love and have it be this rubato place that was sad and lonely, like the Frank Sinatra album *Only the Lonely*, which I consider one of his greatest things. Almost all these songs came to me from vocalists versions, in other words I heard them sung by somebody, and this is the weird thing. I brought the tapes into the house, then I played the record – it was mostly records – and then I put the tape on [I did of the same song] and then I thought, “Keith, this is idiotic. It’s going to blow your thing and you’re going to give up the project because the singer is always going to beat the piano out, the piano goes ‘clang, clang, clang’ and the singer is singing the words, and I always wanted the piano to sound like a voice.” I’m getting ready to get depressed, but I think it’s worth it, I have to persevere, I have to listen to this. And in every case I tried, the reference singing version of these songs was inferior to what I had just done with it on piano in the sense of the meaning of the song. My whole theory all along had been to try and get as close to the vocal version as you can because the words is what the song is about, and the words describe the entire feeling and you gotta get that right, but I never realised you can surpass the words.

Q: That is very interesting, because you tend to think of the voice as being the most direct expression of human emotion.

KJ: Yes, and I still think it is, but the problem, I think, is we’re stuck with words and I was playing this clanging semi- percussive instrument called a piano and it was more convincing than the references I was reviewing

Q: In terms of emotion

KJ: In terms of emotion. I just thought I don’t even have to release this stuff, I have just performed an experiment that nobody else has performed – to my knowledge – and succeeded in challenging myself to a challenge I didn’t realise I was challenging myself to!

Q: Just returning to Mozart’s slow movements, and there is a problem for me with young and not so young musicians rushing for

the sanctuary of double time when playing ballads as soon as possible, it seems

KJ: Yes, *oh yes*. And also like in conversations, people don't know when to be quiet, including me. When I had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, you brought that up earlier, I had the unfortunate luxury of listening to everything I recorded – if I wanted to! And I found out I was not at all impressed and not at all satisfied how things had – it wasn't that I didn't like it, there was so much more I had to do that I hadn't got around to correcting, and that takes a lot of experience. [So when I returned to playing after the illness] I'd hear myself play something on the piano and I'd think, "No, that's not the me that's sitting at the piano, that's the previous me that liked that chord so much and kept playing that chord forever." Now I knew that because going through the Chronic Fatigue thing I had listened to tapes of myself and I realised I wasn't aware of this as I wished I was, I wasn't that conscious [of that] as I wanted to be. If there's one thing I don't think young players of today realise how much more important it is to look at what they're not doing than what they are doing. Somebody I know in London said she knows a lot of jazz players and they go hang out, while they hang out they're playing music and the music that they're playing is basically what they're learning. Like the Rolling Stones, they must have listened to hundreds of blues guys because that was what they were trying to do. But what you have to do is listen to everything, listen to what you've never heard before. When I was a kid, I already knew this somehow. I think my curiosity saved my soul because I spent every penny of what little money I had on a record of a composer I had never heard of or go to the library and get something I never knew existed. If your ears are not open to everything possible, then they literally don't know what is possible.

Q: Well, yes, in jazz the last twenty years certain area of jazz have become very self referential

KJ: Yes. Well the same girl said "I wish I was around in the Sixties." And I said, "I'm glad I was!"

Q: Manfred Eicher too, has said musically it was such a creative time.

KJ: Yes, he has.

Q: Melody can be a lifeline to an audience in improvised music, do you think there is any balance to be struck here, between melody and improvisation, if at all?

KJ: I don't think there should be a balance, everybody has a blood stream, emotions, a heart. If musicians are open to everything they can hear, something is going to connect to someone, everybody in the audience will have a moment when they are connected to what is going on, and at that moment they will wonder "What else is going on? If that's so great then I had better pay attention to the rest of this, even though I'm not sure what I think of this. If you have some limitations, or you're not working on your instrument or you're not really serious, that's when you have to worry what you present to the audience because somehow you have to maintain a career and you're not doing the work. One of my friends said to me a couple of weeks ago, he said, "You know what really makes me happy, when you say 'I have to go practise.'" He said, "I don't know if people know how much work you're doing, but I know it's paying off." That was his take on it. This is an ancillary topic to what we were talking about, but I think it is connected, musicians think in general, and what I used to think years ago, is that you have to find you're voice. That is what you work on for I don't know how many number of years. The things you like are the things you want to play and when you find yourself playing something you don't like, that means it's not you, so you eliminate it from who you are on the instrument, so you end up with a so-called voice of your own. But the fallacy in that – first of all you end up lumping yourself in with the average audience member who will hear something they like and they'll hear something they don't like and they'll say that was good because I liked it, and that was not good, because I didn't like it. What a player has got to do is get the ability to drop all that stuff. I remember walking on stage, we took a break in Belgium, it was with Aldo Romano and the French bass player J. F. Jenny-Clark, he's not alive anymore. And as we walked back onstage I realised I

had found my voice and now I could play the piano. And that's really just step one. So now you have to step up to your instrument and you have to have absolute faith that who you are who you are. But you can't restrict what you play because of that, and you can't play only things you think you like, because I had this experience, starting with *Radiance* [the solo concert recorded on October 27, 2002 at Festival Hall, Osaka], and from then on it's more conscious since then, that if I don't let my fingers find things to play that I have never heard, I'm actually not satisfied. I have to play something that surprises me too, not something I either "like" or "don't like" but just the element of "What is that??" kind of thing. Like you can't freeze it in time, it has just gone by, and I started to realise there's a key here, that there is no freedom until you get to that place. The rest of it is like putting barbed wire around yourself and saying this is my voice now, I'm protecting it from all the bad guys. And the audience is going to recognise that if I play the same way all the time.

Q: I see what you're saying – how can you expect the audience be surprised with what you are playing if you're not surprising yourself.

KJ: The audiences are pretty hip when they are sitting in their seats, they're aware of the fact they don't really want to hear the same thing. Not exactly. And if I give them an encore and it happens to be a song they've heard they will applaud, but I know they're there primarily for an experience and not primarily to have nostalgia.

Q: You mentioned the quartet earlier, do you see a role for that again in your music?

KJ: I am basically never thinking of the future, I actually have things from the past, believe it or not there's a sequel to *Spirits*, that was done on all electric instruments: two guitars, electric bass, drums, percussion, voice and occasionally something else

Q: When did you do this?

KJ: Shortly after I did *Spirits* in the late 1980s, and this has been resting in my house ever since and I played it for a couple of people recently and they go, “Oh my God! This has to come out, because nobody is going to believe this stuff!” And one of the things about it is, I’m playing all the instruments but the thing I really get a kick out of it every time I hear it is how tight the rhythm section is. It’s like the best feel on some of these things I could ever get because I knew what I wanted, when you’re with percussionists their sense of time is slightly different, every drummer is different, and you’re playing piano and you’re trying to blend and find where the rhythmic point is, and it’s a blend of all those guys. But here its so contagious because [the rhythm section] was all me, and I’m not saying this from an egotistical standpoint, it’s, I guess the word is contagious, it’s like hearing Miles’ rhythm section at the Blackhawk and you hear how they are at one, every beat at exactly the same precise place, and for me it was all my sense of time. The reason I bring that up is there is not just a future, there’s a past. At the moment the Trio is going to go the length, the next release is going to be the Paris and the London concerts together, there was something special going on there.

Q: If you were to take this last twenty-six years of the Trio from *Setting Standards* until now, what was you’re practise regime then and what is it now, and how did it affect your music, en route, so to speak.

KJ: This could be an entire book! Well, I’ll take it as bookends. I didn’t used to practise at all [when I was younger] as I was so busy working, and when you’re busy working you don’t notice you can’t change habit patterns when you’re gigging constantly. Most of the early time I didn’t feel the need to practice, I’d practise, of course, but when I felt like it. Now, I practice every day. That’s the bookend version. I practice at what would be concert time

Q: That is interesting

KJ: Yes. That’s the major practice portion of the day, and sometimes before dinner, I’m working on Bach also but now the weather is

getting nicer it's harder to do! It's based on instinct. When I was working on preparing the harpsichord recordings of Bach, the piano got closed up and I played nothing but harpsichord for months because those two instruments are not even similar at all. When I was working on Mozart, all I was practising was Mozart, when I am working on this Bach project until after this weekend I'm not practising anything but that, then two weeks before a concert in Naples, which is a solo concert, I will try and let my fingers remember that they are not playing Bach anymore, and the different muscle groups involved with solo they are immensely different, the muscle groups, the posture, everything changes, so really it depends on what I am about to do. If I was about to go on tour with the Trio, which will be true when I'm home in June, I will be practising by playing or discovering whether they are some tunes I feel like initiating with the Trio. Somebody once said, some jazz player once said, "Don't practice, play." And that's what you do when you prepare for that. It's not like you're practising anything, you just have to play through things forever and you find out if you are innovative that day or not, and you have to assess yourself, "Why didn't I have a good practice session that day?" It's like being your own psychiatrist.

Q: And finally, solo concerts, the ultimate challenge. Can you talk a little about your philosophy and approach to the solo concert.

KJ: Those things are like commissioned works. I'm paid to turn up and to create a brand new thing, that's the most serious thing I do in terms of focus and craziness and impossibility and you don't know [in advance] if you have anything to show. People should know this. When I won the Polar Prize [in 2003, awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Music] they had a seminar there and the first thing I said was, "I know you are all mostly music students and I want you to know it does not get easier than it is right now." Because basically the freer you are, the more you are in charge, and the more you're in charge, unless you're willing to be a mediocre critic, you don't put up with any bullshit from yourself. And that's basically the essence of coming up with stuff that's worth paying a ticket price for. The rest is noodling, I would say, and if there is anything the world does

not need at the moment it's noodling...It's hard to do music and to make a mark in some way – when you get a letter from two people in Beirut saying your music kept them alive through the war there, or you get a phone call from a Swiss painter to say I saved his life, myself and Bach that is, these are not the things to take lightly. It's a serious job and the world doesn't understand it because they've seen entertainers so often they think musicians are entertainers, but they're not.

Q: An important note to end on. Thank you for speaking to me

KJ: A pleasure.

Yesterdays by Keith Jarrett/Gary Peacock/Jack DeJohnette (ECM 177 447)

Setting Standards by Keith Jarrett/Gary Peacock/Jack DeJohnette (ECM 173 7344)