

JAKI BYARD

At the prestigious New England Conservatory in Boston a fortunate few piano students are being personally guided in their development by the astounding Jaki Byard, a musician whose talent was shaped in the crucible of jazz but who transcends category. Byard was asked by Conservatory president Gunther Schuller to head the jazz department (officially known as the "Afro-American Music Department" because of the demands of a black student uprising), and he teaches composition and arranging.

However demanding his administrative and pedagogic tasks, Jaki's first love remains the piano, and that love is passed on to those he tutors as it is to his audiences. In 1936, when he began playing professionally in and around Boston at the age of 16, Byard was heavily influenced by Fats Waller and Earl Hines. He tried never to miss their radio broadcasts, and he began incorporating their styles into his playing. Later, Count Basie and Nat Cole made indelible impressions and, among horn players, Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins. In the forties came the revolution ultimately labeled be-bop and, like such fellow Bostonians as Charlie Mariano, Serge Chaloff and Herb Pomeroy, Byard fell under the spell of Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Dizzy Gillespie.

"All of a sudden, Fats Waller began to seem corny to me and I left him behind for several years," Byard recalls. "And we used to scoff at people playing dixieland, although much later I realized how beautiful many of them had been, and I came to be aware that I was doing many of the things I'd laughed at in their music."

It was during a 1956 engagement at The Stables in Boston that Byard began rediscovering Waller, and the stride style worked its way back into his performances.

"The other musicians didn't dig it, but the public did," he remembers.

Jaki's reverence for the roots of jazz piano has been misinterpreted by some writers. His use of stride, ragtime and swing elements in his solos is not a put-on, and he reacts with some heat when it's suggested he is indulging in cheap theatrics at such moments. In a downbeat interview some years ago he said "I don't play tongue-in-cheek, and I hate to hear people say this about me."

His students at the New England Conservatory are being inculcated with Byard's respect for the giants of jazz piano. The young people are already accomplished pianists. Jaki's aim is to show them what he has learned in his 42 years at the keyboard (he began playing when he was eight). Included is a study of ragtime. He gives each student a classic ragtime piece to play. He asks him to compose a rag in that style and another in the student's own style. And he has them study and emulate the recordings of Hines, Waller, Art Tatum, James P. Johnson, and Bud Powell, among others. It is a discouraging commentary on the blindness and deafness endemic among American music educators that most of the students who come to Byard, although they have been awash in music since they were small children, have never heard these towering figures in American music.

Byard's inquisitive ears capture musical traditions far beyond stride and ragtime. At the memorable 1969 New Orleans Jazz Festival, for which he was house pianist, he presented a solo program of the works of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the first great American concert pianist and a composer whose piano pieces from the mid-nineteenth century predate and anticipate ragtime. Several of us who were fortunate enough to hear that concert have been trying ever since to get Byard to record a Gottschalk album. At the other end of the spectrum, he has been active in what one might call the near fringes of the avant garde. Scattered through-

This is a combination of the liner notes from the CD reissue (Empirical) followed by the original 1973 LP.

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out his albums from the early sixties on, and in others led by such adventurous players as Eric Dolphy, Booker Ervin, Eric Kloss, Roland Kirk, and Charles Mingus, are instances of Byard playing incomparable free jazz. He is more than willing to experiment to go "outside," but unlike so many space-age jazzman Jaki always knows the route he's going to take and he never forgets how to get back. There is a stunning example of this assuredness in **Blues Au Gratin** in this recording.

Byard is best known as a pianist, but he is also accomplished on alto and tenor saxophones, trumpet, bass, trombone, vibes and drums. I was standing with Paul Desmond during a jazz session at a festival a few years ago when Byard leaped up from the piano, grabbed an alto sax and ripped off a remarkable solo. "I wish he'd mind his own business," Desmond muttered. Jaki plays none of this panoply of doubling instruments on this album. Nor, it should be pointed out, does he overdub piano parts. His speed and inhuman coordination may lead you to doubt that, but it's true.

The first Byard solo album, recorded 14 years ago, was never issued. The second, produced by Don Schlitten, was on the Prestige label. This is the third, and Schlitten thinks it's the most complete display to date of Jaki's mastery.

In the parlance of musicians, Byard has "gone through changes" to arrive at his position of eminence in the musical world. Long past the time when he should have been acknowledged as one of the greatest pianists in jazz he was still working as an obscure sideman, and his name was not a household word among even the most devoted jazz listeners until the mid 1960s, when he was well into his forties. During that time of artistic brilliance and personal eclipse, he suffered the social indignities that plagued jazz musicians, particularly black musicians, and survived them,

and changed because of them. But he too has wrought change. More than perhaps any other modern jazz musician, he has made his peers aware of the importance of their roots. And that has helped immeasurably in bringing jazz back from the nether regions into which some practitioners of the past decade have tried to exile it, back to the mainstream. He is looked to by other musicians for direction, and he will continue to change the music.

Jaki Byard is leading a satisfying life. He is teaching in an academic institution universally respected for its excellence. He is passing along the jazz piano tradition of which he is a living embodiment. The rigors and pain of the road musician's existence are behind him; he turns down club engagements and accepts only the concert and recording dates that appeal to him. He is not given the public recognition due him, but he is revered by his fellow musicians and the critics.

And he is at a creative peak achieved by only a handful of musicians in this century.

—DOUG RAMSEY

These are the original notes written in 1973; edited for CD.

JAKI BYARD SOME CHANGES MADE

JAKI BYARD, piano

Side A

1. THERE'LL BE SOME CHANGES MADE 3:57
2. LONELY TOWN 5:29
3. BLUES AU GRATIN 3:29
4. EXCERPTS FROM SONGS OF PROVERBS/TONI 5:17
5. BESAME MUCHO 4:54

Side B

1. SPANISH TINGE #3 2:26
2. JOURNEY/NIGHT OF DEPARTURE 6:49
3. TO BOB VATEL OF PARIS/BLUES FOR JENNIE 5:41
4. SOME OTHER SPRING/EVERY YEAR 5:54
5. TRIBUTE TO JIMMY SLIDE 4:51

(Recorded December 27, 1972)

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There'll Be Some Changes Made opens the album, perversely. Byard uses it for a concert closer unless he's using some other warhorse like **Alexander's Ragtime Band** or **Sweet Georgia Brown**. The verse is heard, a rare event. The harmonic changes are not altered. Jaki definitely makes them.

The chords are altered on Leonard Bernstein's **Lonely Town**. "Ordinarily this would have a typical Broadway show tune sound," Byard says. "In order to improvise on it, I had to have something more interesting than the standard changes. The first change, for instance, is 4-5-1. But I made it 4, 6, sharp 6, sharp 5, then a Neopolitan 6, to 1." Fortunately, it isn't necessary to understand that to enjoy the piece.

Blues Au Gratin, as mentioned, contains a free segment in which Jaki laid metal ballpoint pens across the strings, producing a mysterious, blurred sound. This sort of experimentation, Byard's speed, his eccentric voicings and clusters of notes are a few of the elements that have led Schlitten to refer to him as "the maniac." Asked about the significance of the title, the author is enigmatic: "You

know, au gratin? Cheese? Blues? Bleu Cheese." You figure it out.

Excerpts From Songs Of Proverbs is a melody from a Byard work for soprano voice and symphony orchestra based on the 20th book of the Old Testament. **Toni** is Jaki's grandson. You'll notice that **Songs Of Proverbs/Toni** is the first of three medleys in the album. Byard says he finds himself playing more and more medleys. He enjoys rising to the challenges of their variety and change of mood.

It is possible for a jazz performer to play inwardly and relate to the audience, knowing that if he pleases himself he'll please his listeners. Bill Evans has done that notably well, and continues to do it. Byard, on the other hand, is extremely conscious of his audience and looks for pieces with which they are familiar. **Besame Mucho** is a pop tune he called up from the past during a frustrating concert experience in Paris. "Suddenly I went into it," he says, "and got a big round of applause. People all over the world recognize it. I later used it in Japan and it went over big. The changes are almost like a minor blues at times. In the release it makes me think of Miles Davis with Gil Evans."

The first **Spanish Tinge** was recorded Live! at Lennies on the Turnpike and released on a Prestige album called **On The Spot**. **Spanish Tinge #2** was included in the 1969 Prestige solo album. Byard says: "As long as I record I'll keep the "Spanish Tinges" coming. Because of the tinge in Jelly Roll Morton's music described by Morton as Spanish, it has been assumed that he influenced these pieces of Byard's. Jaki says that's not so: "It's just what I call any of my tunes on a Latin kick." Herewith, **Spanish Tinge #3**.

The ballad theme of **Night Of Departure** was written the night before Byard flew to Japan for a concert tour. The first theme, **Journey**, was used at a concert he played with Japanese musicians and is based on a pentatonic scale used in the Orient. Like most American musicians who have performed in Japan, Jaki was overwhelmed by the response to his playing and by the hospitality. "I like to take my ego to Japan," he says.

The medley **To Bob Vatel of Paris/Blues For Jennie** is for friends of the Byards who live in France. "Bob is a rag-time pianist, a Fats Waller bug. His concept of Waller is fantastic. He's fantastic. He was General Patton's interpreter in World War Two. Patton liked jazz, and Bob used to play for him. He has never recorded. We're going to do a television show in Paris this year on the thirtieth anniversary of Fats' death." (12-15-43) "and I hope we can record together. **To Bob Vatel** is almost like **I Got Rhythm** in construction. **Jennie** is his wife, and she gets the little blues section in the middle."

Byard's first acquaintance with **Some Other Spring** was at a concert in Molde, Norway, when he heard the fine Dutch singer Karin Krog perform it, with obligato by tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon. "Later," he says, "Bud Powell's wife Buttercup gave me a book of songs associated with Billie Holiday, and I learned it. The changes lay nicely. I segued into **Every Year** because it felt good." **Every Year** was written by Byard for a Broadway musical which he gloomily says will probably never be produced, "so now I'm taking the tunes from it and recording them."

Another piece from the musical is **Jimmy Slide**, a tribute to an old Boston friend of Byard's, "one of the greatest tap dancers of the day. Duke Ellington did something for Bojangles. I wanted to do something for Jimmy. The tap dancers are dying out. It's a shame."

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Notes: Doug Ramsey
Recording: Paul Goodman (RCA)
Produced by DON SCHLITTEN