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Jason Moran Takes the Before & After Challenge

Committed listening

By [Thomas Conrad](#)

Nobody sounds like pianist Jason Moran. Yet his jagged, percussive, expansive piano language, with its hard-edged lyricism, has proven adaptable to many musical situations. Besides the Bandwagon, his longstanding working trio with bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits, Moran's projects as a leader have included solo programs, orchestral Monk and small ensembles with such major horn players as Greg Osby and Sam Rivers. His own curiosity, and the high demand for his services as a sideman, have led to diverse collaborations. He has done Fats Waller with Meshell Ndegeocello and ballet with choreographer Alonzo King.

Moran's most important, most transformative contributions as a sideman have come in Charles Lloyd's New Quartet. He has made three highly regarded albums with Lloyd on the ECM label: *Rabo de Nube* (2008), *Mirror* (2010) and *Athens Concert* (2011). It was with Lloyd's band that Moran came to the Belgrade Jazz Festival in Serbia in October 2011, and this B&A was conducted before a live audience at that event. Moran, 36, was relaxed and confident and instantly immersed in the process. He moved to the front row of the audience in order to better hear each track. Usually he kept listening long after he knew who was playing.

1. Jaki Byard

"Charles Mingus Medley: Fables of Faubus/Peggy's Blue Skylight" (from *Sunshine of My Soul: Live at the Keystone Korner*, HighNote). Byard, piano. Recorded in 1978.

BEFORE: So ... majestic. The pianist is Jaki Byard. I'm very bad with titles of songs, but this is a Mingus piece. Jaki Byard was also my teacher, so there are things I relate to his sound: these out-of-the-blue stabs of chords—*boing!* When I was studying with him, this is the thing that I took from him: how to spike the sound, how to punctuate everything. This is a great example of solo piano playing, the way he phrases the melody over and over again. This is a lesson I'm always talking to my students about: Where's the melody? He never gets tired of playing the melody, in the same way that Thelonious Monk never gets tired of playing a melody.

That was really a little emotional for me for a half-second, because this was a man who helped break down a lot of doors, a person who was totally at ease with tradition and totally at ease with throwing it all under the bus at the same time. The true test of a pianist's power is how they function when they're alone. Thanks for playing that.

2. Keith Jarrett/Charlie Haden

"Body and Soul" (from *Jasmine*, ECM). Jarrett, piano; Haden, bass. Recorded in 2007.

BEFORE: That's Keith Jarrett, the record with Charlie Haden. "Body and Soul," which is one of the songs that demands your attention as a player. I always enjoy how Keith plays, and I think "enjoy" is the word. I don't feel tense when he plays, because he has a beautiful way of resolving things. In technical terms, it's how his right hand and his left hand talk to each other. And they really do converse.

Do you have any opinion about Jarrett's famous vocalizations, which are very audible here?

I love it when he does that. What, do we think a performer should just play the piano? No, performers should be free to do whatever they want onstage. I mean, Elvin Jones made a lot of noise when he played drums. Glenn Gould got a lot of shit because he grunted, or began to sing a part of a line while he played it. It's that person's expression. I am totally into a person's added value.

3. Wynton Kelly

"Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise" (from *Kelly Blue*, Riverside, reissued on JVC XRCD).

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Kelly, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Jimmy Cobb, drums. Recorded in 1959.

BEFORE: That's soulful. What I love about this—and people use this word too liberally—is how swinging it is. If you want to define swing, trio playing, medium tempo, this is it. They're not fooling around. They're not in the studio for five days. They're going to nail this really quickly, then leave. It's a feeling that was part of back then. It's a thing that I cannot create—I just can't. My genealogy, how I grew up, won't allow me to play something like that. I'll make a guess: a soulful piano player, like Bobby Timmons?

Make another guess.

Hmm. Maybe, Red Garland?

AFTER: Oh, there you go! Wynton Kelly. Yeah. That kind of swing is like Beethoven—it's that important as a development within music. 1959 was a rough time for African-Americans. It was a rough time in the jazz community. Heroin. There were all these things happening that affected the music. In 2011, there are different things that are affecting music. The economy is affecting music: where we play, what we play, how we play. I always want to take into account the contemporary nature of jazz. As much as I adore studying the history, I also have to be extremely connected to what's happening right now.

4. Vijay Iyer

"Epistrophy" (from *Solo*, ACT). Iyer, piano. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: "Epistrophy," by Thelonious Monk. That sounds like Vijay. Vijay has a distinct tone at the instrument. A lot of piano players go up; he likes to go down. [laughs] He likes to crawl down this mountain into the bottom of the piano. He figures out these ways and shapes that kind of tumble down. He's kind of a brother in the sense we are coming from some of the same spaces. Andrew Hill is an influence; M-Base is an influence; the AACM is an influence—these creative musicians who approach music with a wide outlook. Vijay is a player where you can't really say, "I heard it, I got it." He's still way in development. His technique thing is getting more precise. So he's always fun to listen to.

5. Bill Anschell

"Desperado" (from *Figments*, Origin). Anschell, piano. Song by Glenn Frey and Don Henley of the Eagles. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: So a piano works, like, you have two hands and ... I mean, Bach could actually play four lines, but this piece is kind of a function of two lines. Sometimes you try to figure out which line you think is more important. With this piece, it seemed like they were both important at the same time. Usually, when you play the piano, the right hand is giving a melodic statement and the left hand kind of gives context to the right hand. But here the left hand was sometimes the melody and the right hand was the context, so there was a shift in the dimension of how this person was playing. I'm not going to make any guesses. I can't make any guess about the song either, except that it felt like it was following a form. I like that this has a lot of sustain pedal. With those two lines being at equal volume, the sustain pedal gives it a very nice, very specific space. This is a studied pianist—studied like ... he's not bullshitting. [laughs]

AFTER: The Eagles? "Desperado"? Are they kind of like a quintessentially American band? You don't have the original here, do you? I enjoyed that. That's bad.

6. Brad Mehldau

"Martha My Dear" (from *Live in Marciac*, Nonesuch). Mehldau, piano. Recorded in 2006.

BEFORE: I forget the name of this piece but I feel like I've heard him play this live. This is Brad Mehldau. He's another piano player who has figured out his technique, how to approach a song, repertoire, how to make it interesting for himself. That's the first level you have to get to. Then you make it interesting for the audience. Brad Mehldau, yeah. He's been an important influence over the past 15 years or so. There were years when all the students I would see in my studio would be playing like Brad Mehldau. I would have to inform them that there were other piano players around. [laughs] The way he plays, there's a kind of rigidity. It's not a loose thing that he has. It's stylized. It's like Bauhaus. I love Bauhaus. It's like those buildings. They're soulful, but they're very strict; they're about some concepts and rules.

You don't cover rock songs, like so many pianists of your generation.

Afrika Bambaataa is my Eagles. What jazz musicians who cover other material have to figure out is how that music aligns in their personal history. I covered an Albert King song because my cousins played with Albert King.

7. Stefano Bollani

"Billie's Bounce" (from *Mi ritorni in mente*, Stunt). Bollani, piano; Jesper Bodilsen, bass; Morten Lund, drums. Recorded in 2003.

BEFORE: Yeah. That's good. That's proficiency at its finest. It's nice to hear a piano comp behind a bass solo, too. That's a place where you can show your style, your approach. There's a way certain trios function; the way the piano player plays can really steer the ship. Or, some trios have it where each player has a steering wheel and they all might be going in three different directions. Here you have a trio that is more of a unit.

We talked about Wynton Kelly and where swing was 50 years ago. This track is swing, too, like the new version: much straighter, more even. We talked about Jaki Byard and his punctuations. So the punctuations are different now; the accents have changed. I can't make any guesses about who it is.

8. Ahmad Jamal

"Billy Boy" (from *Jamal at the Pershing, Volume Two*, Argo, reissued in *The Complete Ahmad Jamal Trio Argo Sessions, 1956-62*, Mosaic). Jamal, piano; Israel Crosby, bass; Vernel Fournier, drums. Recorded in 1958.

BEFORE: Ahmad Jamal. I've seen him play a couple times over the past year and rushed backstage and congratulated him. There's a moment in the beginning of that track where he doesn't play anything and I almost turned this table over waiting for him to play something, 'cause I was so anxious to hear what they were going to play next. Sure enough he had these weird hits that came out of nowhere. It is still exciting, so many years later.

Ahmad Jamal is the quintessential stylist of the instrument. He knows how to move; you can tell he knows how to dance. I have nothing but admiration for that kind of precision, that kind of care.

I wanted to get your reaction to a great jazz pianist as different as possible from yourself.

Oh, man, but he's totally an influence on contemporary hip-hop. Ahmad Jamal is responsible for how Robert Glasper is approaching this new hip-hop aesthetic within jazz.

9. Phronesis

"Untitled #2" (from *Alive*, Edition). Ivo Neame, piano; Jasper Høiby, bass; Mark Giuliana, drums. Recorded in 2010.

BEFORE: I can't tell you who it is. What strikes me is how the bassist is playing. The bassist is playing with some ideas. Sometimes in piano trios, unfortunately, the bass player gets locked into this box, so I was glad to hear this bassist not be in that box. You can tell the group has talked about what's going to happen. I feel like they're within my generation. There's a lot of energy there. And that's a beautiful melody at the beginning.

What do you wish I had played?

I loved that you played what you played. [laughs]

Name three records that changed your life.

Herbie Nichols on Blue Note, any volume. *A Love Supreme*. And *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* by Public Enemy. When I heard Public Enemy—I think I was in the eighth grade—I knew that there was a way that you could say something about society through music. It was like "Fables of Faubus," 30 years later. Herbie Nichols says a lot, through piano, about style. *A Love Supreme* talks about spirituality, the possibility of the world.

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