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SILENCE, SIMPLICITY, AND THE SELF: A SUFİ INTERPRETATION OF AHMAD JAMAL'S SPIRITUAL AND MUSICAL TRANSFORMATION*

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Abstract

This article offers an original interpretation of Ahmad Jamal's spiritual and artistic transformation by reading his life and music through selected Sufi ethical concepts as an interpretive vocabulary for discipline and self-fashioning. Building on scholarship that has linked African American conversions to Islam with racial politics, collective mobilization, and alternative forms of belonging, it argues that in Jamal's case spiritual discipline, moral consistency, and aesthetic simplicity are equally central and complement political and sociological accounts rather than replace them. Drawing on interviews and magazine articles published between 1959 and 1993, the study explores Jamal's invocation of "my own vine and fig tree" as a symbol of historical belonging. The analysis proceeds along four axes: Jamal's articulation of universal brotherhood through the figure of Bilāl al-Ḥabashī; his conscious withdrawal from worldly desires via notions of zuhd, tawakkul, murāqaba, and ḥikma; his musical minimalism shaped by iḥsān, laṭāfa, and an ethic of discipline; and his evolving self-confidence and musical language in relation to ideas of maqāmāt, aḥwāl, fanāʾ, and baqāʾ. The article suggests that Jamal's minimalism reflects not merely technical

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choices but the aesthetic expression of an inner discipline that can be heard, without positing formal Sufi affiliation, in resonance with Sufi ethical discourses on spirituality and creativity.

Keywords: Ahmad Jamal, Sufism, spiritual transformation, musical minimalism, jazz and Islam

Sessizlik, Sadelik ve Benlik: Ahmad Jamal'ın Ruhani ve Müzikal Dönüşümüne Tasavvufî Bir Yorum

Özet

Bu makale, Ahmad Jamal'ın ruhani ve sanatsal dönüşümünü, hayatını ve müziğini disiplin ve öz-biçimlenme için yorumlayıcı bir söz dağarcığı olarak kullanılan seçilmiş tasavvufî etik kavramlar üzerinden okuyarak özgün biçimde yorumlar. Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların İslam'a yönelişini ırk siyaseti, kolektif mobilizasyon ve alternatif aidiyet biçimleriyle ilişkilendiren literatüre dayanarak, Jamal örneğinde ruhani disiplinin, ahlaki tutarlılığın ve estetik sadeliğin de aynı derecede merkezi olduğunu ve bu unsurların mevcut politik ve sosyolojik açıklamaların yerini almak yerine onları tamamladığını ileri sürer. 1959–1993 yılları arasında yayımlanmış röportajlar ve dergi makaleleri temel alınarak yapılan çalışmada, Jamal'ın "kendi asma ve incir ağacım" ifadesi tarihsel aidiyetin bir simgesi olarak ele alınır. Analiz dört eksen üzerinde ilerler: Jamal'ın Bilāl al-Ḥabashī figürü üzerinden evrensel kardeşliği kurması; zuhd, tawakkul, murāqaba ve ḥikma kavramları aracılığıyla dünyevî arzulardan bilinçli olarak çekilişi; iḥsān, laṭāfa ve bir disiplin etiğiyle şekillenen müzikal minimalizmi; ve maqāmāt, aḥwāl, fanāʾ ile baqāʾ düşünceleri bağlamında ele alınan gelişen özgüveni ve müzikal dili. Makale, Jamal'ın minimalizminin yalnızca teknik tercihlerden ibaret olmadığını, resmi bir tasavvufî aidiyet varsayılmaksızın, maneviyat ve yaratıcılık üzerine tasavvufî etik söylemlerle yankı içinde okunabilecek içsel bir disiplinin estetik ifadesi olduğunu ileri sürer.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahmad Jamal, tasavvuf, ruhani dönüşüm, müzikal minimalizm, caz ve İslam

Introduction

Sunni Islam grounds the production of religious knowledge in four principal sources—the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, ijmāʿ (consensus), and qiyās (analogical reasoning). These sources are systematized through usūl al-fiqh (legal methodology) and interpreted via ijtihād (Kamali, 1991, pp. 12–13, 20). Within this framework, the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī) emerged, allowing for diverse interpretations while at the same time restricting religious authority to a collective scholarly tradition (Hallaq, 2005, pp. 101–102). In this tradition, fiqh functions not only as a legal system but also as a way of life and a means of moral formation

(McHugo, 2017, p. 39). Debates on music do not derive from an explicit Qur'anic prohibition, but from evolving legal and ethical evaluations of particular practices. Although the word "music" does not appear in the Qur'an, certain verses and ḥadīths have been read as warning against sounds that distract the believer from God. Many jurists therefore adopt a cautious stance, especially toward instrumental and sensually arousing forms of music, treating them as practices that may disrupt worship and weaken moral self-discipline. As a result, music is neither categorically forbidden nor fully embraced in Sunni tradition; it occupies an ambivalent position, confined to carefully delimited contexts and often treated as a potential challenge to personal piety, inner discipline, and moral integrity (Uludağ, 2014, p. 1276).

Given Sunni Islam's cautious approach to music, the embrace of Islam by many jazz musicians from the 1940s onward—often motivated by intertwined social, political, and religious factors—may initially appear paradoxical (Gillespie & Fraser, 1985, p. 291). To make sense of this tendency, a substantial body of scholarship has interpreted these conversions through political, sociological, and identity-based frameworks, framing Islam as a response to race-based exclusion, as an alternative form of social belonging, or as part of collective political resistance. In particular, scholars such as Edward Curtis (2002), Richard Brent Turner (2003), Hisham Aidi (2014), and Sohail Daulatzai (2012) have emphasized how African American engagements with Islam intersect with Black internationalism, civil rights and Black Power politics, and the search for alternative moral and communal orders. These approaches are indispensable for understanding the historical context. Yet they leave comparatively underexamined the ways in which individual musicians articulate their spiritual experience, ethical self-discipline, and aesthetic commitments. This study therefore focuses on Ahmad Jamal's relationship with Islam not in opposition to political or collective motivations, but through the lens of his lifestyle, personal discipline, stage ethics, and the ethical bond he cultivates with music, while fully acknowledging the broader historical and political context in which his conversion took place. Jamal's religious orientation does not rest primarily on affiliation with a particular ṭarīqa or institutional structure; it is grounded in a personal inward search, moral consistency, and an aesthetic understanding of simplicity. Rather than detaching him from Black Muslim histories and collective struggles, this approach seeks

to understand his Muslim identity within the framework of a personal process of transformation and intellectual orientation. The spiritual focus and ethics-centered quest that become evident in Jamal's turn to Islam can be read as finding a strong historical resonance in the tradition of taṣawwuf within Sunni Islamic thought.

Taṣawwuf has often been described as a form of spiritual orientation that arises within this institutional structure and deepens religious practice in the inner world of the individual. This tradition centers on the desire to establish a direct relationship with Allah and revolves around personal purification and simplicity (Nicholson, 1914, pp. 2–4). The early adherents, inspired by the life of the Prophet Muhammad, adopt an inward-looking lifestyle and combine this orientation with moral responsibility (Schimmel, 1975, p. 5). Over time, through the formation of ṭarīqa structures and spiritual lineages (silsila), taṣawwuf ceases to function merely as a personal inclination and evolves into both an institutional and doctrinal tradition (Nasr, 2007, pp. 165–166). Within Sunni circles, this mystical orientation develops in close relation to the disciplines of ḥadīth and fiqh (Nasr, 2007, p. 109). At the same time, certain Sufi ritual practices—such as musical audition (samāʿ) and other embodied forms of remembrance—have periodically provoked criticism from legal scholars, revealing a persistent tension over their legitimacy. In this context, taṣawwuf does not stand outside Sunni Islam; it gains recognition as an inner dimension that complements its moral and spiritual depth, even as its practices remain the subject of recurrent debate.

Taṣawwuf is not merely a system of knowledge but a process of personality formation and moral–spiritual maturation. The ultimate goal of this process is to guide the human being toward the rank of insān al-kāmil, the "perfected human," through inner purification, moral consistency, and divine love (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 104–106). The insān al-kāmil is not only one who purifies the lower self (nafs), but also a figure who manifests divine truth within the self and achieves a balance between intellect, love, and faith (Chittick, 1989, pp. 52–54). This goal is pursued through a spiritual journey interwoven with key concepts found in taṣawwufī teaching. Zuhd (conscious detachment from worldly desires), tawakkul (heartfelt trust in divine decree), ḥikma (wisdom shaped by deep intuition), and murāqaba (continuous inner observation and spiritual vigilance) constitute the core

principles of this inner discipline (Nasr, 2007, pp. 103–115). The principles of laṭāfa (grace and subtlety) and iḥsān (performing every act in the most excellent manner), which foreground aesthetics and ethics of action, establish beauty and etiquette as central values in the life of the ṣūfī (Nasr, 2007, pp. 39–41, 96–97). In the final stages of this journey, the ego dissolves (fanāʾ), and the servant abides in the divine being (baqāʾ); the entirety of this process is known as sulūk—the spiritual journey that unfolds through the discipline of the self (Nasr, 2007, pp. 84–86, 107–110). This theoretical framework can offer explanatory power not only for classical ṣūfī figures but also for modern artists who turn to Islam on an individual basis. In this context, the life and art of Ahmad Jamal, as a contemporary example, can be read as intersecting on an intellectual level with taṣawwuf-based principles of self-discipline.

In terms of sources and method, this article is based on a close reading of English-language periodical sources and interviews featuring Ahmad Jamal between 1959 and 1993. The corpus was assembled through keyword searches (for example, "Ahmad Jamal," "Fritz Jones," "Alhambra," "Islam") in digitized archives of jazz journals and African American popular magazines, and by cross-checking recurring interviews across different issues where possible. This time frame is justified by the fact that 1959 marks Jamal's first widely circulated public statements about his name change and religious orientation, while interviews from the early 1990s still articulate the core elements of his spiritual and aesthetic self-understanding. Given the racialized and sometimes sensationalist rhetoric characteristic of mid-twentieth-century entertainment journalism, the analysis treats editorial framings and headlines with caution, focusing primarily on recurrent patterns in Jamal's own words. The taṣawwufī concepts mobilized in what follows are employed as an interpretive vocabulary for reading these patterns rather than as claims about Jamal's formal affiliation with a particular ṭarīqa. All Arabic technical terms are transliterated according to standard academic usage in Islamic studies, and Qurʾānic and ḥadīth references are cited in widely used English editions where relevant.

Ahmad Jamal's turn to Islam—marked by his distance from worldly desires, disciplined lifestyle, aesthetic simplicity, and pursuit of inner balance—can thus be read as a contemporary and individual instance of such a concern with nafs discipline. In this context, the first section examines Jamal's relationship with Islam through the search for

universal equality, spiritual belonging, and historical roots. The second section reveals his intellectual orientation, his conscious withdrawal from the world, and his emphasis on reading and moral consistency; this orientation is framed through the concepts of zuhd, tawakkul, ḥikma, and murāqaba. The third section reads Jamal's musical aesthetics—based on silence, selectivity, and simplicity—in relation to taṣawwufī values such as laṭāfa, iḥsān, and self-discipline. The fourth section, meanwhile, analyzes his artistic trajectory through the concepts of fanāʾ, baqāʾ, and sulūk, focusing on spiritual balance, inner stability, and self-confidence.

Return to Roots and Belonging

In the August 20, 1959, issue of Jet magazine, Ahmad Jamal explains why he changed his name from "Fritz Jones"—a shortened form that he himself refers to as his birth name, corresponding to the "Frederick Russell Jones" recorded on his birth certificate—to "Ahmad Jamal": "I haven't adopted a name. It's a part of my ancestral background and heritage. I have re-established my original name. I have gone back to my own vine and fig tree" (Jamal, 1959, p. 30). This statement does not merely reflect a change of name; it signifies a conscious return to an identity and heritage that have been forcibly forgotten in the past. The metaphor of the "vine and fig tree" that Jamal uses directly references the verse in the Book of Micah 4:4 in the Old Testament: "Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree" (Micah 4:4, New Revised Standard Version). In sacred texts, this metaphor symbolizes peace, safety, freedom, and justice. Theologian Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that this verse is not just a vision of future hope, but also a theological critique of present oppressive systems (Brueggemann, 1981, pp. 188–204). In Islamic tradition as well, motifs such as the date palm, the olive, and the garden similarly stand out as symbols of sacred tranquility, divine mercy, and inner peace. In this context, Jamal's statement "I have gone back to my own vine and fig tree" expresses a multilayered symbolic return—one directed at both personal freedom and historical–spiritual belonging.

To grasp more fully the spiritual dimension of this return, it is important to consider the meaning embodied by Bilāl al-Ḥabashī in Islamic history. Born around 581 near Mecca as

a Black man of Abyssinian origin and enslaved status, Bilāl becomes one of the first seven people to accept Islam and is subjected to severe torture for his faith. His emancipation by Abū Bakr is recorded as one of the earliest moral and symbolic acts of resistance to slavery in Islam (Arnold, 1913, pp. 14–16). However, the true historical significance of Bilāl is embodied in the Prophet Muḥammad's appointment of him to recite the adhān—the public vocal call to prayer performed five times a day in Islam. The transformation of a Black slave into the first public voice of Islam represents not only a reward for personal devotion but also a deliberate rejection of race-based hierarchies. The Prophet's choice embodies a universal Islamic vision grounded in the equality of all peoples and colors. In this context, Bilāl's voice becomes the voice of faith and brotherhood, while his Black body serves as a symbol of theological resistance to racism as the bearer of the divine message. Indeed, the Prophet's description of Bilāl as "the first fruit of Abyssinia" (Arnold, 1913, p. 15), along with his well-known statement that "an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have superiority over an Arab" (Farooq, 2018, p. 329), underscores that Bilāl's value lies not merely in personal loyalty, but in the ideal of social justice and equality he embodies. For this reason, the story of Bilāl serves as a profound historical reference point for Islamic ideals of universal equality, spiritual liberation, and historical belonging—especially for African and African-descended Muslims.

Ahmad Jamal's understanding of Islam resonates deeply with the universal and individual spirituality embodied by Bilāl. Jamal explicitly rejects attempts to associate him with particular racially or politically motivated Islamic movements of his time. In particular, he responds to efforts to link him with the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, emphasizing that such interpretations fail to reflect the true nature of his religious orientation. As Jamal explains: "They don't understand. I have believed this way all my life" (Still, 1962, p. 52). This statement suggests that his engagement with Islam, while unfolding in the same historical landscape, cannot be reduced to the emergence of such movements and is rooted in a more personal and enduring spiritual commitment. Describing his fall 1959 trip to Egypt, Sudan, and Ghana, Jamal states: "Since I was eleven years old, I had planned to go because my ancestral roots are there; it was a moral obligation for me to go" (Crawford, 1961, p. 18). Taken together, these statements indicate that Jamal's turn to Islam is not a sudden decision or a mere product of contemporary

popular movements, but the outcome of a long-term internal orientation, a conscious construction of identity, and a deep connection rooted in historical and spiritual heritage. The structure in which he feels a sense of belonging is not a formal organization but "another culture that believes in human dignity and true brotherhood" (Still, 1962, p. 52). This declaration not only reflects an understanding of Islam based on dignity and brotherhood rather than on narrow institutional affiliations; it also closely aligns with the ideals of universal equality, freedom, and spiritual belonging embodied in the story of Bilāl al-Ḥabashī.

Read against the broader scholarship on African American conversions to Islam and Black Muslim life, Jamal's trajectory can thus be placed within, yet not collapsed into, wider socio-historical currents. Studies by Edward E. Curtis IV, Richard Brent Turner, Sohail Daulatzai, and Hisham Aidi have highlighted how Islam has functioned for Black Americans as a resource for articulating diasporic belonging, challenging U.S. racism, and imagining transnational constellations of solidarity that link African American struggles to wider Muslim geographies (Curtis, 2002; Turner, 2003; Daulatzai, 2012; Aidi, 2014). Jamal's emphasis on dignity, brotherhood, and ancestral roots clearly participates in this horizon. At the same time, his case foregrounds an additional dimension: an interiorized discipline and ethical self-fashioning that he articulates less through organizational membership than through everyday practices, spiritual vocabulary, and musical aesthetics. In this sense, Jamal's path can be located within, but not reduced to, the collectively oriented histories traced in this literature.

This search for spiritual heritage also manifests itself in Jamal's relationships with Africa and the Middle East. He describes his 1959 trip not as a performance tour but explicitly as "an artistic survey" (Ahmad Jamal Eyes Middle East, Africa, 1959, p. 65), indicating that the journey is motivated less by commercial intent than by a personal desire for discovery. His remark that he does not feel foreign in these regions and that the trip creates a feeling "like going home" (Ahmad Jamal Eyes Middle East, Africa, 1959, p. 65) deepens his cultural and spiritual sense of belonging to these places. This sense of homecoming is grounded not only in a feeling of geographical connectedness but also in what he later describes as a long-standing moral obligation to visit the lands where he locates his ancestral roots

(Crawford, 1961, p. 18). Jamal articulates the meaning of freedom that this journey holds for him in the following terms: "No, I don't like Florida, and I refuse all engagements in southern states. In Africa I have freedom and the sun. In Florida I would only have the sun" (Crawford, 1961, p. 18). This statement suggests that, for him, Islam—and the civilizational connection it offers—functions as a spiritual path of seeking liberation from the racist structure of American society. This embodied experience of return also leads Jamal to a conscious rearticulation of his personal identity.

This quest for freedom and a universal identity also manifests in the ways Jamal defines himself. In one interview he is identified as an "American Arab" (Still, 1962, p. 52), positioning himself both as an American and as a subject who has forged a cultural and spiritual connection with Islamic civilization. This designation reflects a personal and plural identity that he chooses in tension with the reductive racial categories of the era such as "Black" or "Negro." Jamal articulates this multilayered identity transformation not only symbolically but also legally: "It's my legal name, and the one on which I'll collect my Social Security" (Words of the Week, 1959, p. 30), thereby formalizing the name "Ahmad Jamal." This declaration is not merely a change of name; it represents a conscious and enduring assertion of belonging. For Jamal, changing his name serves both as a way to reconnect with the past and as a means of defining himself along a spiritual line that is not exhausted by institutional frameworks or narrow identity labels. This transformation is not only a reclaiming of the ideals of equality, freedom, and divine belonging embodied in the story of Bilāl al-Ḥabashī; it also profoundly shapes Jamal's philosophy of life and his artistic aesthetic.

Inner Journey and Sufi Resonance

Ahmad Jamal's personal and universal connection to Islam gradually shapes him not only as a musician, but also as a figure who carries a profound philosophical orientation. This approach, centered on spiritual values, becomes deeply intertwined with his attitude toward art, life, and worldly matters. He articulates this orientation with the following words: "I am a philosopher and no longer concerned with worldly things" (Still, 1962, p. 50). This statement serves as a critical key to understanding both Jamal's spiritual

direction and his artistic practice. For Jamal, this transformation can be understood as the manifestation of an inner quest for meaning and a life of discipline.

At the same time, reading Jamal through Sufi concepts does not mean that he should be treated as a "Sufi musician" in any institutional or doctrinal sense. The following discussion uses terms such as zuhd, tawakkul, ḥikma, murāqaba, and khalwa not to retroactively impose a fixed mystical identity on him, but as an analytical vocabulary for describing an ethic of self-discipline and interiority that has long circulated in wider Sunni Islamic discourses. As Schimmel and Chittick both emphasize, these concepts function not only as technical terms within organized ṭarīqas but also as ideals of character formation and moral self-cultivation in broader Muslim contexts (Schimmel, 1975; Chittick, 1989). The parallels traced here between Jamal's self-descriptions and this taṣawwufī lexicon should therefore be understood as resonances and points of contact, rather than as evidence of a direct institutional or genealogical continuity.

Jamal's transformation invites comparison with the Sufi concept of zuhd. Zuhd does not mean complete withdrawal from the world; rather, it refers to the purification of the heart from worldly desires. This understanding involves cultivating a conscious distance from material success, temporary fame, and pleasures. Jamal's artistic and life choices can be read in light of this outlook. For example, when he opens the Alhambra Club, he emphasizes that the initiative is not merely a business venture but "a contribution" (Crawford, 1961, p. 19), thus positioning his artistic production within a more meaningful mission, separate from commercial profit. He also states, "Money and our present values never did mean anything to me" (Still, 1962, p. 50), expressing a firm stance against the material standards imposed by the modern world. These statements suggest that he consciously distances himself from false values and embraces a more sincere mode of spiritual existence.

Zuhd is also closely related to tawakkul (trust in Allah) and inner equilibrium. In taṣawwufī thought, tawakkul refers to the capacity to remain in a state of surrender when confronted with events beyond one's control. Jamal articulates a similar orientation when he states: "And you can't have control over an instrument unless you have control over your mind. You must adhere to a way of life. We'd all lead more adequate lives if we had

self-control" (Jamal, 1959, p. 17). This perspective forms the foundation of the inner peace he seeks to cultivate in the face of life's challenges. Following experiences such as the closure of Alhambra, his divorce, and other personal losses, Jamal states that he does not feel sorrow and expresses his state with the words: "I am happier than I have ever been in my life. I am at peace with myself" (Still, 1962, p. 50). This declaration can be understood as pointing toward a state of itmi'nān—serenity of the heart—that is relatively independent of external circumstances.

Jamal's identity as a "philosopher" gains further depth through his orientation toward knowledge and wisdom. He states, "And I urge people to acquire as much education as they can, in both a worldly wise and scholastic sense" (Jamal, 1959, p. 17), emphasizing the indispensable role of learning in personal growth. By saying that he dedicates several hours a day to reading, he reveals the importance he places on continuous learning and intellectual discipline. This intellectual posture is intertwined with a critical stance toward worldly power. Referring to the well-known anecdote in which Alexander the Great approaches the philosopher Diogenes, Jamal echoes the philosopher's reply: "For you to remove thy shadow from my presence so that I may continue my reading" (Still, 1962, p. 50). This quotation exemplifies a life choice that prioritizes intellectual independence over material authority. Jamal's intellectual orientation can be read as resonating with the taṣawwufī concepts of ḥikmah (wisdom) and murāqabah (contemplative self-observation and inner discipline). His inner devotion to knowledge becomes a source of intuition, balance, and self-control in both his personal life and artistic practice.

This inward focus also deeply informs Jamal's approach to art. He warns against the speed, competition, and superficial standards of success imposed by the materialist age, stating: "we drive ourselves to do impossible things because of false values in this materialistic age" (Jamal, 1959, p. 17). According to Jamal, true success in art is only possible by remaining loyal to fundamental values. At the heart of these values lies the principle he formulates as follows: "I belong to another culture which really believes in the dignity of the human being and the real brotherhood of man" (Still, 1962, p. 50), which serves as a guiding ideal both in his life and in his artistic vision. Jamal defines jazz not merely as a form of entertainment but as a spiritual and aesthetic mode of expression, famously stating, "Jazz is not entertainment; it's an art" (Words of the Week, 1981, p. 32). This

approach embodies both an aesthetic of simplification and a transformation of inner discipline into an artistic language, shaping his relationship to his art as well as his career choices. Jamal's periods of withdrawal from art can be understood as different facets of his inner journey. His business ventures in Africa and America, or his decision to give up music in order to devote himself in particular to painting and sculpture, are not merely efforts to find a new career path; rather, these periods can be interpreted as signs of a search for alternative forms of expression or as indications of a conscious retreat. In particular, the fact that he did not touch the piano for nearly six months during one hiatus, and, as reported, that "He now seems to know what the meaning of the 21 years he has spent as a professional musician should be, but he can show you better than tell you" (Crawford, 1962, p. 42), reveals the spiritual depth of this internal process. These moments of withdrawal can be interpreted as resonating with the taṣawwufī practice of khalwa (solitude), which refers to a state in which the individual steps away from the world, remains alone with the self, and engages in spiritual introspection. Nothing in the available sources suggests that these withdrawals were structured as a formal spiritual retreat under the guidance of a shaykh; rather, the language of khalwa is used here to capture the experiential affinity between Jamal's self-imposed solitude and the broader Islamic practice of withdrawing from the world in order to work on the self.

Ahmad Jamal's career advice, which emphasizes preparation and versatility, suggests that he regards art not merely as a field driven by success but as a practice of sustainable and balanced living. He advises: "Prepare yourself with options... Go to school and get an education so if you cannot break into performing you can teach, or write, or conduct. Education provides the doors to many options" (Jamal, 1988, p. 40). This perspective may be understood as a form of "pragmatic zuhd," since Jamal advocates for a conscious and measured engagement with worldly responsibilities in order to sustain his artistic practice. In this respect, his stance both overlaps with and departs from classical asceticism: it retains an ethic of restraint while insisting on the practical need to secure the conditions of one's vocation in the modern world. His lifestyle, rooted in knowledge, inner peace, and core values, can be read as resonating with foundational concepts of taṣawwuf such as zuhd (ascetic detachment), tawakkul (trustful surrender), murāqaba

(contemplative vigilance), and ḥikma (wisdom). In this light, the musical aesthetic he cultivates through silence, space, and simplicity can thus be approached not merely as a technical choice but as an artistic articulation of the spiritual discipline that underpins his practice.

The Aesthetic of Silence

One of the most striking aspects of Ahmad Jamal's music—what often captivates listeners and distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries—is his use of space and silence. Yet for Jamal, this is not merely a technical choice or a tool for creating atmosphere. Over many years, critics and listeners have referred to this phenomenon as "space," but Jamal explicitly rejects this description and assigns it a much deeper, philosophical meaning. He articulates this position as follows: "No, it's not openness; it's discipline. Some people call it space, true. But I call it discipline" (Lyons, 1983, p. 117). This statement can be taken as a key to understanding how Jamal connects his artistic aesthetic to his personal philosophy. For him, silence is not emptiness but a conscious presence, an expression of will, and above all, the result of inner discipline.

As in the previous section, however, the Sufi vocabulary mobilized here is not intended to recast Jamal as a "Sufi musician" in any formal or institutional sense. Rather, notions such as zuhd, murāqaba, jawāmiʿ al-kalim, or aḥwāl are used as an interpretive lexicon for describing patterns of self-discipline, economy, and attentiveness that have long circulated within broader Islamic ethical and aesthetic discourses. The correspondences traced between Jamal's practice and these concepts should thus be understood as resonances and analytic analogies, not as claims about his explicit self-identification or doctrinal commitments.

This understanding of discipline is grounded in the principle of necessity. In one interview, Jamal explains that there are moments when he should simply "lay out" because it is not necessary for him to play (Lyons, 1983, p. 117). His words can be read as resonating with the taṣawwufī principle of wise silence and the avoidance of superfluous speech or action. In this view, every note and every gesture must carry a purpose; anything aimless or unnecessary—including musical "noise"—is to be eliminated. This approach may also be understood as a form of expressive economy. Yet Jamal's insistence on the word

"discipline" suggests that this is not merely a matter of technical efficiency; it also carries a moral and spiritual dimension. It evokes the posture of someone striving to master the self—speaking or acting only when necessary—and allowing that aspiration to be articulated through music.

This musical discipline is closely linked to Jamal's broader philosophy of self-control. As he states, "When we master ourselves, we can master anything" (Jamal, 1959, p. 17), and this principle applies equally to the moments of silence at the piano. The ability to remain silent—to restrain the urge or habit to play—requires a high degree of inner strength and self-regulation. This attitude can be read as evoking the taṣawwufī practices of disciplining the nafs (riyāḍa, mujāhada) and inner observation (murāqaba). Jamal disciplines not only his fingers but also his internal impulses. The level of "concentration and demands absolute attention" (Jamal, 1959, p. 17) that he describes as necessary for musical performance can thus be seen as part of this inner discipline and focused awareness. Jamal's understanding of discipline also shapes his expectations regarding performance venues. When he defines an ideal club, he emphasizes not only the absence of physical violence but especially that it should be "a place where people aren't talking too loud" (Tiegel, 1966, p. 57). This emphasis reveals how essential tranquility and respect are for his art. In this context, for the silence and spaces in his music to carry meaning, the external environment also needs to embody a certain calm and discipline. This approach reflects his search for inner balance as it extends to the performance space and can be understood as an important condition for fully engaging with Jamal's music.

On the other hand, Ahmad Jamal's philosophical and spiritual approach, which he conceptualizes as "discipline," can be seen as informing his pianistic performance, contributing to a minimalist and refined musical aesthetic that many critics regard as distinctive within jazz history. At the core of this aesthetic lies not only his conscious use of space and silence, as discussed above, but also his commitment to economy of expression, selectivity, and nuance. Critics and listeners have often described Jamal's playing as "simple," "unadorned/concise," and "sparse but colorful" (Williams, 1993, pp. 281–282). In interviews, he repeatedly returns to the idea that there are times when he should simply refrain from playing because it is not necessary for him to do so (Lyons,

1983, p. 117). This attitude can be understood not merely as a technical choice but as a concise expression of an aesthetic stance grounded in restraint and discipline.

This minimalist approach is embodied in Jamal's ability to create a powerful effect with few notes. His "sharp and precise strikes, constructing a dramatic solo using the same minimalist materials" (Lyons, 1983, p. 112) demonstrate that his simplicity is not a lack but rather a concentrated and refined mode of expression. This attitude can be read as recalling the taṣawwufī concept of jawāmiʿ al-kalim (conveying much meaning with few words), which elevates the wisdom of concise expression. Jamal's conscious avoidance of repetition in music is also part of this economy of expression; it reflects his desire to make every moment fresh, meaningful, and unique. This minimalist philosophy also extends into Jamal's harmonic language, where his refined approach to chords further reflects his aesthetic and spiritual sensibility.

Moreover, Jamal's minimalism is not a superficial simplicity; on the contrary, it is adorned with a profound sense of elegance and subtlety (Wilson, 1993, p. 73). His "light touches" (Lyons & Perlo, 1983, p. 66) impart a quality to his music that is both delicate and highly controlled. This elegance can be read as resonating with the taṣawwufī concepts of laṭīf (grace, delicacy) and iḥsān (doing something in the most beautiful manner), which foreground refinement and beauty in action. Jamal's expression can be read as an artistic manifestation of spiritual maturity. In this context, the elusive quality that Miles Davis repeatedly referred to as the "Jamal feeling" (Davis & Troupe, 1990, p. 190) can be heard as pointing toward this hard-to-define aesthetic and spiritual excellence. This minimalist and refined aesthetic is also clearly evident in his harmonic structure. Influenced by classical music training and modern harmony concepts, his use of stacked tones reminiscent of impressionists like Ravel and rootless or open chords associated with Bill Evans lends both depth and spaciousness to his sound (Williams, 1993, pp. 281–282; Lyons, 1983, pp. 113–119). This harmonic openness can give Jamal's music the character of a sound "freed from worldly weight," suggesting a certain spiritual lightness and transcendence. As a result, his music often conveys an "ethereal" quality that can be heard as pointing beyond technical virtuosity to a more profound spiritual dimension. Rather than following rigid structures, his improvisations unfold with an intuitive flow, as if guided by an inner stillness. In this sense, Jamal's work may be interpreted as resonating

with the taṣawwufī notion of aḥwāl (spiritual states) within a musical context. His frequently expressed aspiration to "go beneath the surface" captures this very search for transcendental depth and inner exploration in his art.

Ahmad Jamal's musical approach can thus be understood not merely as the mark of technical mastery, but also as an articulation of a profound spiritual and philosophical stance. Silence, space, and restraint in his music are not simply aesthetic choices; they function as elements of a deliberate relational mode built upon inner balance, self-discipline, and an economy of meaning. This understanding, shaped around the concept of "discipline," can be read as carrying a strong conceptual resonance with taṣawwufī notions such as zuhd (asceticism), murāqaba (meditative vigilance), ḥikma (wisdom), and laṭāfa (grace, subtlety). The musical language that avoids excess, integrates simplicity with density, and shapes each note with intentionality can be approached, by analogy, as a contemplative form of meditative remembrance (dhikr)—non-repetitive, succinct, and open to reflection. Jamal's minimalist aesthetic, in this sense, can be understood not only as an artistic strategy but also as expressing a moral and spiritual posture; it can be heard as offering a rare kind of artistic manifesto that demonstrates how silence and simplicity may be deeply profound, affective, and transformative, without presupposing a one-to-one correspondence between musical performance and formal devotional practice.

The Music of Self-Confidence

Ahmad Jamal's artistic journey does not follow a static line but exhibits a constant evolution that parallels his personal and spiritual development. In particular, the changes in his musical expression are closely bound up with transformations in his inner world—especially a growing sense of self-confidence. When reflecting on his earlier minimalist style that relies heavily on "spaces," Jamal partly associates it with a phase of personal searching, which he makes explicitly clear in his own words: "When I was young, I was trying to achieve something—not necessarily from other people, but from myself. I was trying to gain confidence. When you have more confidence, the ideas flow more easily. That's what the difference in my playing is now. It's more fluidity, fluency. You have a greater flow of ideas when you have more confidence. I'd say my playing is fuller now,

broader, and more percussive" (Lyons, 1983, p. 115). This statement suggests that Jamal's early aesthetic—centered on silence and simplicity—can be understood not only as a conscious artistic choice, but also as part of a process of self-recognition, the search for inner balance, and the gradual building of trust in oneself.

As in the preceding sections, however, the Sufi terminology employed below—maqāmāt (stations), aḥwāl (spiritual states), fanāʾ, baqāʾ, and sulūk—is not intended to imply that Jamal consciously modeled his life on classical Sufi handbooks or that he explicitly identified himself within a particular Sufi order. Rather, these concepts are used as an interpretive lexicon for thinking about how the patterns of maturation, balance, and ongoing development that he describes can be heard in conversation with Islamic discourses on spiritual progression and self-discipline. The parallels proposed here should therefore be understood as heuristic resonances and analogies, not as claims about doctrinal adherence.

Over time, Jamal appears to move toward a greater sense of inner balance and spiritual maturity. This transformation becomes particularly visible around his difficult personal period in the early 1960s and the subsequent six-month hiatus from music. During this time, Jamal withdrew from performing and focused on self-reflection; afterwards he remarked that he was "happier than [he had] ever been in [his] life" and "at peace with [himself]" (Still, 1962, p. 50). Rather than articulating this new understanding primarily through words, Jamal chose to express it through action—specifically, through his music. When he returned to performing and revisited his earlier works, contemporaneous accounts noted new depths in these pieces, as they bore little or no resemblance to their previous versions, suggesting that his evolving inner state was reflected in his renewed interpretations (Crawford, 1961, p. 19).

Jamal's growing inner confidence seems to go hand in hand with an evolution in his musical expression. Looking back on his earlier playing, he contrasts a period when he was "trying to gain confidence" with a later style he describes as marked by greater "fluidity" and "fluency," and as "fuller," "broader," and "more percussive" (Lyons, 1983, p. 115). This retrospective description suggests a close and dynamic relationship between his inner state and his musical language. Here, the notion of "fuller" refers not merely to an increase in the number of notes, but also to expansions in harmonic structure, rhythmic

variety, and melodic density. Increased self-confidence appears to allow for a freer, more fluid, and more expansive form of expression. Rather than simply replacing the minimalist "discipline" that characterizes his earlier phases, this later style can be heard as reconfiguring that discipline through a heightened sense of inner freedom.

However, this evolution does not imply a departure from Jamal's fundamental aesthetic principles. Even as his style changes, his unique musical taste and tactile sensibilities remain intact. While his mode of expression may become more "full," the elegance, subtlety, and depth unique to his music are preserved. This pattern can be read as loosely analogous to the maqāmāt (spiritual stations) encountered during the Sufi journey (sulūk): although the traveler experiences different aḥwāl (spiritual states) and develops new modes of expression, the essential direction and identity at the core of the journey remain constant. Jamal's statement, "My style changes. Any artist trying to mature, changes," followed by his admission, "I'm not finished developing; I'm just beginning," clearly reflects this ongoing evolution and process of aesthetic and spiritual maturation (Tiegel, 1966, p. 57). In this vein, the shifting balance between restraint and expansiveness in his music may be approached as an analogy to Sufi reflections on the interplay of fanāʾ (annihilation of the self) and baqāʾ (subsistence in the divine presence), rather than as their literal realization in Jamal's life. Jamal's transformation in musical expression can be seen as increasingly intertwined with a sense of professional responsibility alongside inner liberation. His artistic aim, while valuing innovation and success, also includes a commitment to maintaining an intrinsic consistency. He articulates this orientation with the following words: "There might not be the same kind of discipline in my playing these days because I'm trying to achieve different things. Now I'm looking for consistency of performance as opposed to achievement. The ultimate goal of any performer has to be to play at a high level night after night" (Lyons, 1983, p. 117). This statement suggests that Jamal's inner transformation leads him to cultivate an artistic awareness that seeks to infuse every moment with meaning—across aesthetic, technical, and spiritual dimensions. This approach can be read as resonating with the taṣawwufī concept of murāqaba, understood as a state of constant attentiveness and mindfulness; it links the artist's desire for self-transcendence with an effort to maintain consistency and depth in

every performance. This quest for steadiness, reinforced by confidence, may be understood as reflecting Jamal's integrated vision in which spiritual maturity and professional ethics move along a single trajectory.

In conclusion, Ahmad Jamal's artistic evolution can be understood as deeply intertwined with his inner journey. The transformations in his musical style appear closely linked to his growing self-confidence. His early minimalist approach, articulated around the concept of "discipline" during his youth, gradually opens into a more fluid, rich, and impactful form of expression as he seeks inner balance and spiritual maturity. Yet this transformation does not compromise the elegance, subtlety, and depth that are intrinsic to his music. Jamal's art is distinctive not only for its technical mastery, but also for the way it articulates a life orientation shaped by spiritual depth, inner transformation, and aesthetic simplicity. In this respect, and without collapsing the distance between his experience and formal Sufi training, his artistic evolution can be read as a particularly vivid example of how an artist's internal state and spiritual development may be translated into, and transformed through, musical practice.

Conclusion

Ahmad Jamal's life and art can be understood not only as an instance of musical success but also as a sustained process of personal transformation. The trajectory traced in the four main sections of this study suggests that his relationship with Islam is neither reducible to an idiom of racialized identity nor exhausted by the political collectives and movements of his era. Without denying those broader contexts, Jamal's music and life have been read here as articulating a multilayered transformation—from the desire to return to his roots to the cultivation of inner discipline, from the aestheticization of silence to the spiritual sources of self-confidence—that seeks to complement existing political and sociological accounts by foregrounding an interior ethic of discipline and simplicity. This transformation does not rest on affiliation with any particular ṭarīqa or organizational structure; rather, it emerges as a form of individual spirituality that can be read as meaningfully resonating with key concepts of Sufi thought. With the metaphor of "returning to my own vine and fig tree," Jamal can be understood not only as changing his name but as participating in a broader effort to construct an identity oriented toward

historical justice and spiritual belonging. In light of his evocation of Bilāl al-Ḥabashī, this gesture can be read as positioning Islam, for Jamal, as a horizon of liberation from racism and as a resource for imagining universal brotherhood. As it appears in the sources examined here, this orientation is shaped less by formal institutional affiliation than by personal conscience and historical memory. Jamal's way of life can be understood as unfolding on an ethical plane that can be read as resonating with Sufi concepts such as zuhd, murāqaba, ḥikma, and iḥsān. Silence, simplicity, and self-discipline appear in his musical understanding not merely as aesthetic preferences but as expressions of moral discipline. His insistence that what others call "space" is, for him, "discipline" (Lyons, 1983, p. 117) indicates that he regards every musical decision as a conscious and purposeful act. In this light, the emphasis on each note carrying intention, on the deliberate avoidance of repetition, and on constructing music around meaning rather than density can be approached as an aesthetic of intensity oriented toward wisdom.

Over time, Jamal's musical language can be heard as undergoing a significant transformation. The simple and minimal approach of his early period can be understood as closely related to an inner search for self-confidence. In the following years, this simplicity opens into a more fluid, rich, and self-assured mode of expression. Yet this evolution does not signify a departure from his core aesthetic principles; rather, those principles acquire continuity in new forms. His remark that "the ultimate goal of any performer has to be to play at a high level night after night" (Lyons, 1983, p. 117) has been read here as expressing a sustained concern with attentiveness and consciousness that can be related to the taṣawwufī notion of murāqaba.

In conclusion, Ahmad Jamal's relationship with Islam can be understood as gaining its primary significance not through affiliation with a specific sect or institutional structure, but through individual discipline, aesthetic simplicity, and an ongoing inner search. This study has proposed an interpretive framework that reconsiders his music through selected Sufi concepts, used here as a heuristic vocabulary rather than as evidence of formal doctrinal affiliation, in order to suggest a particular way of reading the aesthetic expression of individual spirituality in a contemporary artist. In this light, Jamal's music

can be heard not only as the bearer of sound but also of silence; not only of virtuosity but also of self-restraint; not only of aesthetic elegance but also of moral responsibility.

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