Hank Jones: One Extra Ace (2006) **Work Sample No. 3**

No living jazz pianist is as universally admired by his peers as Hank Jones, the suave elder statesman from Pontiac who will celebrate his 88th birthday on July 31. Wherever he performs, you'll find a convention of pianists packed elbow-to-elbow, spellbound by every melodic pirouette and magical twist of harmony. Jones' musical savoir faire is as sly as a pickpocket on the make. Just ask a few leading pianists what they think of Jones.

"He's one of the most important pianists in the history of the music, period," says Bill Charlap.

"It's hard to find words for a guy like him because he's just so magnificent," says McCoy Tyner.

"All of us marvel at Hank Jones," says Cedar Walton.

The aristocratic touch, relaxed elan, encyclopedic breadth and note-perfect clarity that have defined Jones' style for nearly 60 years remain largely undiminished. His energy level and ambition are high, and he still travels the world to perform. While he has always been a musicians' musician, revered by insiders more than the broader jazz audience, public attention has picked up as Jones approaches his 10th decades. In the past 18 months, there have been major features on him in the New York Times and the jazz press and more than half a dozen new and reissued Jones CDs have been released. Jones' recent work with Joe Lovano, a vanguard saxophonist nearly 40 years his junior, has raised his profile among a new generation of listeners and critics. The 2004 death of Jones' younger brother Elvin, a groundbreaking drummer, has also served as a wake-up call to the public. Of the trio of Pontiac-bred Jones boys who became jazz royalty, Hank, the eldest, is the sole survivor. Thad, an innovative composer and trumpeter, died in 1986.

Jones has been so good for so long that he's been easy to take for granted. He's appeared on hundreds of albums and worked with many of the most important figures in jazz history, including Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. But the subtlety of his pianism, journeyman profile and self-effacing personality pushed him to the sidelines. In fact, Jones says he turned down invitations to join bands led by Parker in the 40s and Davis in the late 50s because he felt unqualified and because he was reluctant to leave the security of the CBS-TV studios, where he was a staff musician from 1959 to 1975. "Both times I said, 'I'm not good enough to do that,' " Jones recalls ruefully. "Isn't that something? I probably missed the chance of a lifetime."

Jones' art is comprehensive. He is a sensitive accompanist, a brilliant solo pianist and an emotional improviser who develops ideas like a storyteller. His roots lie in the piano kings of the '30s, especially the ornamental sweep of Art Tatum and the refined elegance of Teddy Wilson. But Jones also embraced the rhythmic and harmonic advances of the bebop modernists of the '40s, particularly pianist Bud Powell. The result is a supple style beyond fashion or category. Liquid single-note lines melt into luxurious chords. Deft interplay between left and right hands animates the structure. Luminous harmonies shift like light in a Turner landscape. His swing is impeccable, his taste unerring, his touch angelic. And there is just enough grease in his ideas to balance his tuxedoed elegance with down-home soul. Jones' marriage of grace and guts created the template for a school of modern jazz pianists from Detroit — he was later followed by Tommy Flanagan, Barry Harris and Roland Hanna — and his often overlooked influence has seeped into the bloodstream of jazz.

"His style is as profound and defined as any of the major masters," says Charlap. "It's equal to Teddy Wilson, equal to Bill Evans, equal to Thelonious Monk, equal to Tommy Flanagan. It's as much a unique musical utterance and just as balanced in terms of intellectualism and feeling. With Hank Jones you hear the past, present and the future of jazz piano. … Hank touched all of the players who came after him, including Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock."

For 20 years, Jones has lived in a modest white clapboard house on some 250 acres of sprawling farmland in upstate New York, near Cooperstown, 215 miles from Manhattan. The remote location suits his demeanor and leaves him less than two hours from his daughter in Albany. He lives with his wife of 41 years, Theodosia, who is in her 90s. On this Saturday, Jones wears a houndstooth sport coat and slacks and sits on the sofa in the paneled living room. He has a lanky build, long face, deep-set eyes rich with expression, a bald pate with salt-and-paper trim and a wispy mustache with an extra dash under his chin. His fingers are long and lean and his skin is the color of dark caramel. When he laughs, which is often, dimples light up his face.

Jones is thinner than he once was, down to 155 pounds with the consent of his doctor. His health is generally excellent. There is a treadmill downstairs, but it is rarely used. His only serious problem occurred a few years ago when he fell backward on the stairs. The consequences of the fall were minimal, but X-rays revealed an aortic aneurysm, which was corrected by surgery. There are two pianos in the house: an upright downstairs and a Baldwin baby grand upstairs. Jones sheepishly admits that neither is in tune and the Baldwin needs repair. Still, he practices at least two hours a day, usually after breakfast. "I never tried consciously to develop a 'touch,' " says Jones. "What I

tried to do was make whatever lines I played flow evenly and fully and as smoothly as possible. I think the way you practice has a lot do with it. If you practice scales religiously and practice each note firmly with equal strength, certainly you'll develop a certain smoothness. I used to practice a lot. I still do when I'm at home."

Students take note: “Preparation is his secret weapon,” says Cedar Walton.

Jones studied classical music as a child and later sought out teachers to polish his technique after arriving in New York in 1944. For years, Bach, Beethoven and Chopin were his morning juice and coffee, and echoes of Chopin's romantic harmony still can be heard in some of Jones’ clever chordal movement and voice leading. “I’m a modern player in the sense that I try to stay abreast of what people would like to hear today rather than what they wanted to hear 35 or 40 years ago,” he says. “There's this constant process of editing. You retain the things that are consistent with your approach to music and you discard those you don't think are consistent. What resonates with me is harmony. I try to use harmony that seems more innovative, more expressive, more descriptive. I make a conscious effort to do that. The more you practice doing it, the more natural it becomes. I'm always looking to go further and find something else I could do, some other musical color that I can create.”

Lovano, who has made two celebrated CDs with Jones with a sublime quartet along with bassist George Mraz and drummer Paul Motian, says that the pianist plays remarkably free within the structure of standard tunes, always inventing fresh melodies and often re-harmonizing portions of a song differently every time through the form. “He really lives in the moment of the music,” says the saxophonist. “Some players play by rote. Hank is very spontaneous.”

Jones is known as one of the grand gentlemen in jazz, not only for the majesty of his musicianship but also his dignified carriage. He doesn't smoke, drink or swear and believes that all good things come from God, the legacy of growing up in the Baptist church and his father’s disciplined household. Still, don’t mistake a mild countenance for a meek constitution. As he recalls traveling with trumpeter Hot Lips Page in the segregated South in the ‘40s, a flash of anger overtakes his face with such intensity that it looks as if he’s having an out-of-body experience. “One time we got into the train station and there was a driveway next to the path when you walked by the station. We had our bags lined up on the sidewalk next to the tracks and some guy with a truck came along and ran over our bags.” Jones’ eyes grow large and fill with fire. “We just had to take that stuff. What are you going to do? You were in the

deep South, and all they wanted was an excuse to beat you or lynch you. If I had been like some guys — hot-tempered — I might have gotten killed."

To this day, Jones will not stomach any disrespect. Last year, he was to appear at an event in Steinway Hall in Manhattan and then receive an award from the Jazz Journalists Association. A car service was dispatched from New York to pick him up at his home, but upon arriving the driver refused to help Jones with his bags. Jones refused to leave the house, and the car returned to the city without him.

The third of 10 children, Jones was born in Vicksburg, Miss., but raised in Pontiac from the age of a few months. He started piano lessons at 10, and records by Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Fats Waller and assorted blues singers introduced him to jazz. He began working local gigs as a teenager, leaving Pontiac after high school for jobs in the Midwest. It was in Buffalo that he first heard in person Art Tatum, whose supersonic technique and head-spinning modulations left even Vladimir Horowitz shaking his head in admiration. "After his last set, we'd go hang out at some restaurant or private home and play until daylight," says Jones. "I sat right next to him. Or next to the case of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Nobody could get between him and his beer. I'd watch his hands, but you couldn't learn very much from watching because his hands moved so fast. You'd listen to the harmony and what he was playing and you began to hear certain things and after a while you recognized what he was doing and then why he was doing it, which was more important."

In New York, Jones came face-to-face with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk, all of whom were pioneering the complex new jazz known as bebop. Jones' style began to morph, though the high-wire intensity and lightning syncopations of bebop never found their way into his unruffled gait. "Even today, I don't think I'm a full-fledged bop player," he says. "When I'm improvising in that vein, I'm reaching out for it. I'm trying to capture the essence of it."

Jones blossomed in the mid-'50s, averaging five or six recording sessions a week, sometimes as many as 10. Of all his sideman appearances, Jones singles out two as his favorites: alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley's "Somethin' Else" from 1958 (Blue Note), where the simmering understatement he and Miles Davis (in a rare supporting role) bring to the date create a thrilling chemistry with the more overt hard bop of Adderley, bassist Sam Jones and drummer Art Blakey; and vocalist Johnny Hartman's lovely "I Just Stopped By To Say Hello"(Impulse) from 1963,

where the pianist suavely and presciently shadows Hartman's bedroom baritone. Jones' own recordings for Savoy in the '50s are all beauts, but the exquisite solo album from 1956, most recently available as an import on Fresh Sounds (Spain), is the pick of the litter. Jones plays 10 standards and two extemporaneous blues, offering a note-perfect distillation of his art on an superb instrument captured with halo warmth and intimacy by engineer Rudy Van Gelder: It is one of the greatest solo piano records in jazz.

For many years, Jones' job at CBS paid the bills. He'd accompany singers, comedians, jugglers, dancers and animal acts on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and other programs. The pay was good, about $250 a week (or $1,600 in today's dollars). But the music was rarely inspiring. "I learned one very valuable thing," Jones deadpans. "Never do that kind of work again." Jones got called for all kinds of gigs. You know that famously salacious rendition of "Happy Birthday" that Marilyn Monroe sang to President Kennedy in 1962 at Madison Square Garden? Yes, that's Jones accompanying her on piano. For a time in the late '70s Jones worked as the onstage pianist-conductor in the Broadway hit "Ain't Misbehavin'," but for the last quarter century he has refocused his career on jazz, fronting a series of multigenerational trios and recording prolifically.

Perhaps the most rewarding gems of Jones' latter-day discography, 1993's "Upon Reflection" (Verve) pairs him with his brother Elvin for a heartfelt program of imaginative, witty music by their brother Thad, who had died six years earlier. The pianist says one of his few regrets is that he didn't record more with Thad and Elvin at the same time. (The best of the few examples is "Elvin!" taped under the drummer's name for Riverside in the early '60s.) In 1975, the explosive young post-bop drummer Tony Williams brought Jones and the Detroit-bred bassist Ron Carter together for a week at the Village Vanguard. The band was billed as The Great Jazz Trio and the name stuck as a moniker for a number of subsequent all-star groups that placed Jones in the company of vanguard musicians a generation or two (or three) younger. Carter and Williams had anchored the innovative Miles Davis quintet of the '60s, and the cross-generational partnership with Jones resulted in some of the pianist's most stout playing on record. The way Jones tackles the pedal-point harmonies on John Coltrane's "Naima" and the modal-flavored "Favors" in 1977 on the exceptional "At the Village Vanguard" (Test of Time) underscores the timeless modernity of his pianism.

Strikingly consistent, Jones really doesn't make subpar recordings, but a short list of his other especially inspired albums from recent decades would include the trio dates "I Remember You" with George Duvivier and Oliver

Jackson (1977, Black and Blue Europe) and “The Oracle” with Dave Holland and Billy Higgins (1989, Emarcy). “Our Delights” (OJC) is sumptuous set of duets with fellow pianist Tommy Flanagan from 1978. “At Maybeck Recital Hall” (Concord) is a solo piano recital from 1991, while the celebrated “Steal Away” (Verve) brings bassist Charlie Haden into the fold for a soulful program of spirituals taped in 1994.

"In the realm of improvisation, if you can conceive it in your mind, you should be able to play it if you have the technique,” says Jones. “Then your musical personality will come out. But it takes a long time to do that. In the end, the sum total of all that you've heard and experienced and thought about up to that point becomes your personality."

From the ‘70s forward, Jones’ New York club appearances inevitably became standing-room-only events. “When you listen to him, it’s like you’re in a concert hall because he covers so much ground,” says McCoy Tyner. “He tells a story. He has such a gift and so much under his belt, and he's got his own world that just captivates you."

Jones insouciance has always masked his fierce work ethic, but in recent decades his growing confidence began to manifest itself on the bandstand in quiet maneuvers of wily sophistication. Drummer Dennis Mackrel, who worked with Jones from 1990 to 2004, likens the pianist to a quiet hustler or pool shark. “When we played New York, every great pianist from George Shearing to Kenny Barron would come in,” says Mackrel. “Hank was very subtle, but when someone of a high caliber came in, he’d get more advanced harmonically or rhythmically. It would go up a notch. Not to say, ‘Look at me,’ but just to let them know he was still the cat. He's like a card player where no matter what game you're playing, he’s always got a better hand. He’ll always have that one extra ace.”