



Al Jarreau

by John Radanovich
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Singer Al Jarreau was born into a Milwaukee family in 1940, a family that fully expected him to exceed in everything he did. He credits his success in entertainment to his Midwestern upbringing.

“The neighborhood where I went to high school was a true melting pot. We were Mexican, black, Polish, and the school was in an Italian neighborhood, so all of us knew a little Italian. We got along famously. It was a wonderful climate and we all grew because of it.”

Jarreau’s New Orleans-born father had gone north in search of work in the late 1930s. As a boy, Jarreau was just as interested in sports as he was in music. He excelled in several high school sports, winning a basketball scholarship to Ripon College. He even spent a summer at the training camp for the Milwaukee Braves major league baseball team. He still keeps in touch with high school friends, some from his old Lincoln High track team. “If I’ve achieved anything it was in large part because I was watching those guys strive and achieve, learning how to be a cross country runner, a lonely runner. I watched those guys become state champs, and have since watched them become serious citizens of the community.”

Although Jarreau’s parents insisted that their children earn college degrees (the singer has a bachelor’s and master’s in psychology), the household was musically inclined.

“We didn’t have much money for records, but we all listened to great AM radio. At the same time rock and roll was appearing, I was listening to Miles Davis and Bill Evans. I heard Frankie Lane and Patty Page, but Howling Wolf, too. All that music came out of the same loudspeaker all day, except that what they called race music was usually played between 4 and 8. There was Randy’s Record Mart from Gallatin, Tennessee, which ran day and night, and you could pick it up in Milwaukee. Most of the time Randy’s was playing gutbucket blues, but it was also where I first heard Johnny Smith’s ‘Moonlight in Vermont,’ the station’s theme song. It was a wonderful ballad by this fantastic guitar player, a jazzier.

“All of that stuck to my soul and somehow become part of what I do today. The first Nat King Cole song I heard must have been ‘Straighten Up and Fly Right.’ He and Billy Eckstine were very important for me, and so were Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Jon Hendricks, King Pleasure. Over my oatmeal, I heard them all on another radio show called Daddy-O Daily.

“I was singing doo-wop before it was doo-wop. We were just singing rhythm and blues of the time, and rock and roll was still in its infancy. I sang in quartets on the street corner, under the streetlights, in the stairwell—anywhere that would have a reflective surface to make that wonderful reverberating tone.

“All of it found its resting place inside me—not stayed there resting, but kicking up a rumpus. It still finds a way to hiccup its way out of me.”



Jarreau began a serious music apprenticeship by moving to San Francisco to work as a rehabilitation counselor and to be nearer the entertainment world. His day job paid the bills while he fashioned his voice and style. “I knew that even if I were singing at the Holiday Inn in San Francisco, someone who mattered might walk in and hear me.” Eventually, he met keyboard player George Duke who also had interests in varied kinds of music.

Having developed a sound influenced by several types of music, Jarreau continued performing and encountered the usual difficulty getting a record contract. Record executives weren’t yet sure what to do with a music that would come to be known as jazz fusion: a mixture of jazz improvisation, rock, and R&B.

“I knocked on every record company door, and more than once. Moe Austin [Warner Brothers executive] recognized that this was not mainstream rock music. He just wanted to be involved with something that wouldn’t necessarily be hit music but had some value. It was a difficult time in terms of those many little disappointments, but man I was still doing music. You can’t disappoint me when I get to do music every day. None of that executive level stuff matters to me. But take the mike out of my hand and I would become very unhappy.

His first albums, beginning with *We Got By* (1975), were embraced by jazz critics and sold more with each record until *Look to the Rainbow* won a Grammy in 1977. That year began a succession of years that *Down Beat* voted him best male vocalist. Meanwhile, Jarreau was exploring other song types, learning how to stretch his vocal range. Whereas most scat singers imitate horn players, Jarreau seems to imitate **any** instrument. Although he has been said to possess “an entire orchestra in his throat,” a better comparison may be made to a Moog synthesizer. His “yawning,” stretching notes out approach—an influence of Jon Hendricks—has spawned a generation of “vocalese” singers such as Bobby McFerrin and the group Manhattan Transfer. Yet like his major influences of Sam Cooke and Nat King Cole, the blues still lurks somewhere near his ballads some of the time.

In creating his own category, Al Jarreau has done very well: five Grammys, four gold records, and countless sessions with Brazilian, classical, soul, rock, and jazz artists. His composition for the theme song of the hit television series *Moonlighting* was responsible for one of the Grammys. He continues to win “smooth jazz” awards, although most of his music is really R&B.

Jarreau’s charismatic Johnny Mathis good looks have never hurt him any, either. He has made appearances on *Touched By An Angel* and *New York Undercover* and has played Teen Angel in the Broadway *Grease!* revival.

Jazz critics are not as kind to Jarreau’s music as they once were. Brazilian music began to exert a lot of influence on his sound after the Down Beat awards, and this probably is responsible for critical dislike of his later records. Leonard Feather says he has “given up” on Jarreau, and others have accused him of being “too sunny,” at times a fair assessment from a modern jazz perspective. Still, unlike George Benson who crossed over from jazz to pop, Jarreau was never strictly a jazz musician to begin with.

Jarreau explains the Brazilian character in his music: “I became aware of Brazilian music



at the time I was with George Duke, when that music made its arrival in the States. It hit me like a tsunami. It knocked me down and I still haven't recovered. It changed my life, musically. Those subtle little rhythms inside of everything. I love that approach." Brazilian openness in rhythm and syncopation has had a major impact on Jarreau's entire sound; he loves looser vocalization that floats over the instruments and away from the melody. Brazilian music also lends itself to Jarreau's often cheerful lyrics.

Although Jarreau is usually labeled "smooth jazz" nowadays, he has won Grammys in jazz, pop, and R&B. His talent and enthusiasm are obvious. His **Best Of** collects the biggest hits: "Roof Garden," "We're In This Love Together," "Take Five," "So Good," "Agua de Beber," and "Boogie Down." As R&B, funk, or Brazilian jazz, these songs are easy to like. The record also includes an interesting cover of the great social commentary/R&B/jazz classic, the Les McCann and Eddie Harris "Compared To What?" The song's appearance on **Best Of** is due to a longtime fan's suggestion. "I was standing in the grocery line when a man about my age asked whatever happened to 'Compared To What?' It just about knocked me to the floor. Here we are in the produce section, and he suggests one of the most wonderful songs I might ever do."

Last year's *Tomorrow Today* on GRP Records was Jarreau's first studio record in 6 years. That record employs Vanessa Williams on a duet, trumpeter Rick Braun, and saxophone player Boney James.

Al Jarreau adds, "I always wanted to be musically appealing to the listener and to me. Maybe excite some interest in a little different approach to song, maybe have someone become interested in improvising, exploring the ups and downs of the human voice. A lot of it is in the message, in the poetry, in the spirit of things, a hope for tomorrow. It's hope for us, for us to get it right. I think we can get it right here on this plane, on this level. And why not? That's what it's all about, learning to make that other harmony without personal or interpersonal discord."