

# Take Five with Al

Grammy Award winner Al Jarreau's style of imitating instrumentalists has shot him to fame

john lui

**R**enowned jazz singer Al Jarreau's most distinctive trait, the improvised vocal style called scatting, comes from trying to imitate the instrumentalists he admires.

His singing, which has propelled a prolific career that spans four decades, was heavily influenced by the keyboard styles of legendary American musicians George Duke, Chick Corea and Count Basie.

"There is a thing that they do that represents excellence. It makes you want to follow it in your own work," says Jarreau, 69, who will be in town next month to perform at the Singapore Sun Festival.

Speaking to Life! from his home in Los Angeles, the seven-time Grammy Award winner calls his staccato yet flowing singing delivery "vocal percussion".

He laughs when he considers how, if he had been gifted at playing an instrument, he might have had enough of an outlet for improvisation and so not pursue singing. He says: "I am indeed fortunate that I did not fall in love with another instrument."

Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to a father who was a church minister and a moth-

er who was a church pianist, Jarreau started out singing in church with his family.

The entertainer, who has a bachelor's in psychology and a master's in vocational rehabilitation, never studied music formally and became a singer only in the late 1960s after performing at a few San Francisco club dates with Duke.

From jazz, his music crossed over to the pop charts and his 1981 Breakin' Away album spawned the mainstream hit, We're In This Love Together, which earned him a Grammy for Best Pop Vocal Performance.

He went on to become one of the few performers in history to ever win Grammys in the pop, R&B and jazz categories.

His seventh and last Grammy came in 2007, for Best Traditional R&B Vocal Performance on the classic song, God Bless The Child.

Now on YouTube, his complex, percussive versions of the Dave Brubeck standard Take Five

has garnered over 300,000 views.

Jarreau, who is twice married and has an adult son, says age is catching up on him and that he is undergoing therapy for various muscle and joint ailments.

While his medical complaints are not serious enough to stop him from touring, they might restrict his stage movements.

"I never was known for dancing, so if I don't dance on stage, nobody's disappointed," he says, laughing.

When he is not touring, he is composing, he says. He enjoys working with younger musicians and in melding his style with theirs.

Last month, he released a hip-hop track Excellent Adventure, a collabora-

tion with Ahmir Thompson, the drummer for hip-hop group The Roots. The track is part of his new album, a greatest hits collection titled The Very Best Of: An Excellent Adventure, out later this month.

He has also worked with R&B singer Jill Scott, who along with Thompson embodies the "Philadelphia sound".

"It's a very relaxed, organic approach to the phrasing. The emphasis is just a little behind the beat and it's just attractive to me. I love it," he says.

For his performance here on Oct 6, he will sample music from every genre and phase of his career.

He is also known for involving the audience in his show. "I'll invite the audience to talk to me, to sing along and have fun," he says.

For now, despite his aches and pains, he is looking forward to his visit to Singapore, the first in his career.

He does not have any plans to retire. "I'll stop when they take me away feet first," he says, chuckling.

But he adds: "Realistically, if you live long enough, you will get old. I will take a break at the point where I am not doing good work any more, which I hope is never."

johnlui@sph.com.sg

Life! is the official newspaper for the Singapore Sun Festival.

book it

## AL JARREAU IN CONCERT

**Where:** Esplanade Concert Hall  
**When:** Oct 6, 7.30pm  
**Admission:** \$48 to \$148 from Sistic  
 (go to [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg) or call 6348-5555)

PHOTO: SUN FESTIVAL