

The New York Times

November 9, 2009

MUSIC REVIEW | VIJAY IYER TRIO

Mowing Down Bar Lines in Virtuoso Banter

By **[BEN RATLIFF](#)**

Vijay Iyer's trio lights up through improvised, viruslike rhythms. It's not a situation in which the drummer's steady swing underpins whatever the pianist is doing; that did happen sometimes at the Jazz Standard on Friday, but it wasn't where the action was.

What you look forward to with this bright, aggressive group is when pianist and drummer lock into the same gestures, building a simultaneous, virtuosic, percussive improvisation. The drummer follows the pianist, the pianist follows the drummer, down long, chattering rhythmic chutes. It stretches harmony and mows down bar lines, until Mr. Iyer plays a cue and the music changes. Someone's got to be the Holy Spirit, representing your faith that this jazz will breathe, and not just become a bramble of polytonality in a drum clinic. It's the bassist, of course, cutting through with big, wise, rounded notes.

Really good piano trios are studies in balance, and with the release of his new album, "Historicity," his first piano-trio record, Mr. Iyer gives us a new one. The trio on Friday consisted of Mr. Iyer on piano, Stephan Crump on bass and Justin Brown substituting for Marcus Gilmore on drums. The band members were tired, having played at the Berlin Jazz Festival the night before, and though the two drummers' styles are close, the group doesn't have the same magic fluidity without Mr. Gilmore. But it was still impressive, and made good sense in jazz's larger perspective.

Since Mr. Iyer is kind of a drummer himself on the keyboard, this is a group that makes you think about rhythmic bloodlines. If Andrew Hill was one of Mr. Iyer's clear antecedents — melodies made from prickly, stubborn phrases, overlapping rhythms, dark and dense harmony turning into beauty — then bebop rhythm was to Hill as funk is to Mr. Iyer. The funk bobbed and weaved, came into sight and then disappeared. It turned up in the set during the bold 11-beat rhythm of Julius Hemphill's "Dogon A.D." and in a version of [Stevie Wonder's](#) "Big Brother," transformed with a blizzard of piano improvising around the melody. It even showed up in Mr. Hill's fragmented, rhapsodic, tumultuous "Smokestack," which became a kind of concerto for Mr. Brown, building patterns all over the kit while keeping a steady pulse.

The group gives you the positive shudder of hearing a new idea, or at least a contemporary idea. (Its rhythmic concept has much in common with that of Jason Moran's trio.) But it doesn't only do postmodern onslaught. Mr. Iyer's music contains echoes of piano trios going a long way back in jazz — maybe not all the way to [Bud Powell](#), but certainly to Ahmad Jamal.

Mr. Iyer knows how to pace a set, too. There were quiet moments at necessary places — in "Big Brother," during a piano solo, the drums died down to a pitter-patter of brushes on snare — and ballad moments, like his own "Our Lives," with a chain of chords borrowed from Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady." Mr. Iyer is a sentimentalist, as well as everything else.



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Jazz review

Vijay Iyer highlights the abundance of young talent in contemporary jazz world

Howard Reich

Arts critic

November 2, 2009

In the late 1980s and 1990s, a new wave of jazz musicians -- widely dubbed the "Young Lions" -- galvanized the listening public and the commercial marketplace. Artists such as Wynton Marsalis, Marcus Roberts and Nicholas Payton put acoustic jazz back on the American cultural radar, generating broad media coverage and a period of support from the major record labels. With both the media and record industries in duress, those heady days clearly have ended, yet you could make the case that a still newer generation of artists has matched (or topped) the artistic achievements of their recent predecessors. One recent example: The remarkable surge of young talent that conquered Symphony Center on Friday night. Opening the show, Vijay Iyer reaffirmed what a growing discography and recent Chicago performances have indicated: He's redefining the nature of modern jazz pianism.

To Iyer, the fine line separating sophisticated jazz harmony from its classical counterpart does not exist. Nor do traditional backbeats, conventional song forms or predictable phrase structures. Instead, Iyer and his trio build complex sound structures in which texture, meter and melodic line change direction every couple of bars or so. In "Historicity," the title track of Iyer's latest CD, the pianist offered fiercely contrapuntal passages one moment, granite chords the next and barely perceptible gestures at the extremes of the keyboard a moment later. Yet one musical theme flowed organically into the next. Most of the evening's tunes probably were not familiar to many listeners, but Iyer's performance of "Somewhere" (by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim) made clear how thoroughly he and his trio can transform a work. Bassist Stephan Crump heroically produced as much sound as he could despite losing a string just before the set began; and drummer Justin Brown played empathetically, though one wished that drummer Marcus Gilmore had been able to make this date.

The full splendor of Iyer's trio (with Gilmore) emerges on "Historicity," but in this show, Iyer's mercurial pianism, Crump's against-all-odds virtuosity and Brown's lithe and nimble drum work underscored the breadth of young talent in our midst. So did the evening's concluding set, with veteran bassist Dave Holland leading his Overtone Quartet, staffed by three younger musicians. To hear saxophonist Chris Potter unfurling long, free-ranging solos -- with elegant pianism from Jason Moran and brilliant utterances from drummer Eric Harland -- was to be struck by the ever-rising caliber of jazz talent in America.


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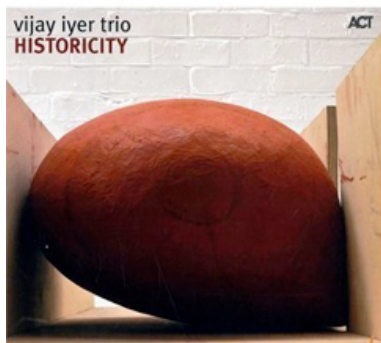
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Album review: Vijay Iyer Trio's 'Historicity'

October 14, 2009 | 5:41 pm



Never let it be said that pianist Vijay Iyer is one to shy away from a challenge. And, frankly, when you've got the chops he has, why would you? Not content to simply be regarded as one of the most promising up-and-coming jazz pianists of his generation, Iyer's latest recording's mix of audacious covers and originals should mark his group as one of the top piano trios in the game.

Armed with Iyer's dense rearrangements of songs by titans from the world of avant-jazz, pop and R&B -- including Bernstein, Sondheim and Stevie Wonder -- "Historicity" is a sprawling and invigorating listen, one filled with such imagination that it can't help but be heard as something of a

mission statement.

One of the interpretations most likely to turn heads is a driving, bottom-heavy take on M.I.A.'s "Galang" that comes early in the album, and while it makes an instant impression it only hints at the trio's capabilities. The pianist-composer Andrew Hill's "Smoke Stack" features Iyer embarking on a mind-scrambling assortment of keyboard runs atop a percolating foundation from rhythm section Stephan Crump and Marcus Gilmore.

But it's Iyer's own compositional verve, on display with the title track and the meditative, ever-expanding "Trident: 2010" where his gifts shine the brightest. The latter track explores a host of musical worlds before Gilmore closes the song down with a rumbling solo. At times Iyer and his charges exhibit so much virtuosity and skill it's almost overwhelming how quickly ideas rise and fall through a given track, but attempting to parse all this trio is trying to say is well worth the effort.

If you're interested in jazz piano, where it's at and where it can lead, track down this album.

-- Chris Barton

Vijay Iyer Trio
"Historicity"

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Piano original: The inventive Vijay Iyer

Howard Reich

Arts critic

October 27, 2009

Why has pianist Vijay Iyer become one of the most discussed young musicians in jazz? Listen to his trio on his latest release, "Historicity" (ACT Music), or check out his appearance this weekend at Symphony Center, and you'll start to understand why. The depth of his sound, the originality of his conception and the epic scope of his performances make him a singular figure in contemporary jazz.

Though much has been written about the influence of Iyer's Indian heritage on his music - particularly his collaborations with alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa (a former Chicagoan) -- Iyer's music on "Historicity" transcends such considerations. Instead, "Historicity" unfolds as a daring exploration of the sonic possibilities of the modern jazz piano. Its heroic keyboard passages overflow with dense sonic clusters, urgently telegraphic repeated notes and lush layers of harmony.

No other ascending jazz pianist today sounds like this, or conceives improvisations on such a herculean scale. Moreover, in radically transforming music of Stevie Wonder ("Big Brother"), Andrew Hill ("Smoke Stack") and Leonard Bernstein ("Somewhere"), among others, Iyer leaves no doubt as to the breadth of his conception. Shards of the originals may appear here and there, but the dramatic fervor of his climaxes and the mercurial nature of his solos are pure Iyer. With drummer Marcus Gilmore and bassist Stephan Crump deeply enmeshed in the sonic texture of this music, Iyer leads a trio as distinctive as its pianist. In effect, Iyer galvanizes the trio format via the unconventional structures and unpredictable narratives of his work. "You could see our covers as tributes, but we've also tried to augment each song with a fragment of ourselves," writes Iyer in the liner notes to "Historicity." "Each cover becomes a conversation between the original work and something else entirely."

That's actually understating the case, considering that Iyer and colleagues effectively have made complex new works of the historic tunes they've chosen to play. Meanwhile, original Iyer compositions -- such as the title track -- prove at least as bold. Unfortunately, only two-thirds of this trio will appear at Symphony Center, with drummer Gilmore to be replaced by Justin Brown. Then again, even if Iyer were alone onstage, he'd be essential listening.

Raw Materials reopens south Asian connection

By *STEVE FEENEY / REVIEW*

September 12, 2009

The music of south Asia began to have an important influence on progressive jazz in the late 1950s. It was a bit later that musicians with roots in that part of the world entered the American music scene in any numbers.

In the 1990s, two U.S.-born musicians of Indian descent began to reinvigorate and expand the multicultural connections within contemporary jazz. Pianist Vijay Iyer, a native New Yorker, and alto-saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, from Colorado, met in California nearly 15 years ago and have been playing together often in various groupings ever since. Perhaps the purest example of their collaboration is their duo project called Raw Materials, which they brought to the Olin Arts Center at Bates College on Thursday night.

Raw is not necessarily the first word that came to mind when these two musicians began the two-hour concert with a tune called "Shapes of Things." Refined could equally apply as a description as the academy-trained duo wove almost impressionistic lines around the initially quite delicate theme. It was clear early on that although their music would be far-reaching, it would also display a high degree of sophistication.

Make no mistake, there was also a great amount of power and drive in their work. Mahanthappa's "Forgotten System" developed a degree of intensity to rival anything heard on the music scene today.

Labyrinthine melodic lines, often played in very precise unison, would give way to passages of dissonance where Iyer's percussive attack would inspire Mahanthappa into rapid fire, but still very sinuous, strings of notes. One could hear Bartok as well as perhaps Ravi Shankar in the blending of various classical and folk music forms these fellows could conjure.

Indian vocal music is also sometimes mentioned in relation to this duo's sound. The saxophonist's piece called "Melodious Voice," inspired by his viewing of a Himalayan mandala painting, pulsed in creating a mesmerizing musical picture built on variations in tempo and dynamics.

By combining familiar with less familiar musical approaches and concepts, the duo was able to surprise the relatively small but very attentive crowd with unexpected transitions and resolutions. A new piece appropriately called "Testing" even had the saxophonist fighting back laughter at times as Iyer musically led him through some difficult territory.

After this edgy tune had run its course, Iyer commented that sometimes the music "even beguiles us!"

Tunes like Iyer's "Regions," with its elegiac tone, and the final piece of the evening, Mahanthappa's "Hope," brought things a little closer to a (still left-of) mainstream sound that balanced nicely against the surging intensity and virtuosic expressiveness of two very fine musicians.

The New York Times

September 13, 2009

THE NEW SEASON: POP

It's His Moment: Listen

By [BEN RATLIFF](#)

VIJAY IYER'S piano trio sneaked up on listeners when they weren't really paying much attention to it. It was there in some of the best parts of Mr. Iyer's impressive recent quartet album, "Tragicomic" (Sunnyside), that don't include the group's saxophonist, Rudresh Mahanthappa; it surfaced in occasional gigs or commissions over the past four years for the band's three other musicians, the pianist Mr. Iyer, the bassist Stephan Crump and the drummer Marcus Gilmore. But "Historicity," to be released on Oct. 13 by the German label ACT, is piano-bass-drums from beginning to end, and so it's probably the moment to say: Presto! Here is the great new jazz piano trio.

The new music by this New York pianist, 38, is just as quick coursing and strict rhythm dodging as the rest of his work back to the mid-1990s. (He loves working with long, percussive piano vamps in odd time signatures, and Mr. Gilmore can make them dance and stagger.) But here the result is sleeker, more stylish and tuneful, powerful without unnecessary bulk.

It's also Mr. Iyer's first serious attempt at a repertory album, dotted with other people's songs, including M.I.A.'s "Galang," Andrew Hill's "Smoke Stack," [Leonard Bernstein](#)'s "Somewhere" (from "West Side Story"), [Stevie Wonder](#)'s "Big Brother" and Ronnie Foster's "Mystic Brew."

In a highly functioning jazz-piano trio playing original music, Mr. Iyer explained in a recent conversation, "everyone is contributing structural information." In other words, "you're not just playing over something: you are that something at the same time." The next step, then, was to work with other people's structures and see if the principle held. None of the covers on the new album were written for piano trio, and that alone would legitimize a lot of overhaul. But Mr. Iyer doesn't go coy or perverse. Through the band's own interactive arrangements you can hear the melody of each song, and its intended mood too. (With "Big Brother," full of Mr. Crump's ominous bowed bass, Mr. Iyer took special care, because when you play it without words, he said, "you forget that it's a really dark song.")

Mr. Iyer talks about the "disruptive" quality of the songs he covers, and by that he means the questioning spirit of the music that he identifies with as a listener. With one exception.

"I don't think 'Somewhere' has a disruptive quality," he allowed. "But if Coltrane can do 'My Favorite Things,' I can do 'Somewhere.'"

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Vijay Iyer Trio: Newport Jazz Festival 2009



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Vijay Iyer Trio performs at Newport Jazz.

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August 8, 2009 from *WGBH* - Vijay Iyer might be a genius. He has a master's degree in physics, an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Technology and the Arts from Berkeley. He's also a largely self-taught pianist — and a powerhouse player at that — and composer for string quartet, theatre, film, orchestra, spoken-word multimedia, free improvisation, ESPN commercials, etc. And as a jazz bandleader, his quartets and trios translate his post-idiomatic artistic outlook into spiky, supercharged songs.

Iyer's forthcoming trio disc *Historicity*, featuring longtime collaborator Stephan Crump on bass and young phenom Marcus Gilmore on drums, represents yet another twist. It's largely an album that revisits some of what he sees as seminal works, be they from adventurous jazz legends (Andrew Hill, Julius Hemphill), modern pop stars (M.I.A.) or his own early recorded compositions. Those covers, reoriented by the sensibilities of Iyer's trio, will be among the highlights of his set at Newport, opening the action at the Harbor stage on Saturday.

Set List

"Historicity" (Iyer)

"Big Brother" (Stevie Wonder)

"Somewhere" (Bernstein)

"Mystic Brew" (Ronnie Foster)

"Dogon A.D." (Julius Hemphill)



Issue 212 : Mar 19–25, 2009

Top live show

Vijay Iyer Trio

Jazz Showcase; Fri 20–Sun 22

By Areif Sless-Kitain

Working with everyone from avant-garde darling John Zorn to left-wing hip-hop duo Dead Prez, pianist and fierce intellect Vijay Iyer is a remarkably complex, thoughtful presence in the jazz world. The native New Yorker's elegant, lyrical approach to improvisation is startling from the instant his fingers press upon the keys.

Following on the heels of last weekend's run with fellow Indian-American and longtime collaborator Rudresh Mahanthappa, Iyer settles into the Jazz Showcase. He's supported by the loyal rhythm section of sturdy bassist Stephan Crump and remarkable drummer Marcus Gilmore, grandson of the legendary Roy "Snap Crackle" Haynes.

Iyer is in top form on last year's triumph, *Tragicomic* (Sunnyside), tackling issues of race with both gravity and humor, as hinted at in the title of the furious cut "Macaca Please." Alongside Mahanthappa, Gilmore and Crump, Iyer's quick-witted interplay abounds with stunning chops, occasionally offset on moodier tracks like the graceful, eerie "Aftermath."

The 37-year-old Iyer, son of Tamil immigrants, adds cultural accents and flourishes throughout his catalog, as is apparent on *Tragicomic's* bookends, "The Weight of Things" and "Becoming." The piano's sustain expands into meditative templates that resemble drones and enchanting ragas.

With epic melodic narratives and a precise attention to structure, Iyer's playful excursions reveal a progressive approach that's sincere without being overshadowed by his formidable ability. It's that balance of technical mastery and tasteful cognizance that keeps the physics ace (he holds a master's, not to mention a Ph.D. in technology and the arts) operating at the forefront of the improv vanguard.



6 Imaginary Place, Aberdeen, New Jersey, 07747 Phone: 732-566-2881 Fax: 732-566-8157 email: myles1@optonline.net

Hartford Courant.
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Iyer Quartet Creates Jazz With Intricacy, Intellect And Emotion

By CHUCK OBUCHOWSKI

June 19, 2008

Vijay Iyer's quartet filled the Yale Law School courtyard with scintillating sound for 90 minutes Tuesday evening. The jazz pianist focused his attention primarily on a series of original compositions from "Tragicomic," his new CD on Sunnyside Records. The concert, part of New Haven's International Festival of Arts & Ideas, drew an attentive, appreciative audience. Iyer, who graduated from Yale with a degree in mathematics and physics, was thrilled to return. Iyer's music contained detailed rhythmic structures and a logic that might be attributable to his academic pursuits at Yale. His tunes also revealed subtle pop and world-music influences. More important, each member of this quartet seemed intent on finding the emotional core of each piece. Longtime Iyer colleague Rudresh Mahanthappa delivered many of the concert's most impassioned solos. His alto saxophone on the opening "Macaca Please" combined brain and brawn; he demonstrated lightning speed on par with Sonny Fortune, and the intellectual acuity associated with Lee Konitz.

Bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore made a mighty rhythmic team. The latter, just 21, is already a five-year veteran in Iyer's group. His multi-directional percussive power has a strong antecedent; Gilmore's grandfather is jazz drum master Roy Haynes. Gilmore played a significant role during a trio performance of "Comin' Up," which Iyer referred to as "an obscure Bud Powell classic." The piece featured shifting rhythms and tempos that ultimately settled into a dub groove. Iyer dedicated "Comin' Up" to Yale Professor Michael Veal, author of "Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae." Iyer's playing, while containing traces of past jazz piano legends, has matured into a fairly unique dialect. This sound was especially identifiable during the lovely ballad "Remembrance," a duet with Mahanthappa. The composition, written for his grandparents, exhibited an almost-classical sensibility, but the pianist's reflections were quite distinctive.

The quartet devoted the latter half of its program to three segments from Iyer's "Tragicomic" suite, a work commissioned by Chamber Music America. He described the instrumental suite as being about the current state of American society. The work began with "Aftermath," a dramatic piece that gradually built to a crescendo before giving way to a striking piano solo. "Machine Days" followed, dominated by a fluid alto sax solo and equally compelling drum feature. The aptly titled "Threnody" concluded the program on a melancholic note. Although this segment remained dirge-like, Mahanthappa delivered a pining improvisation that offered a glimmer of hope. Iyer returned with Crump and Gilmore to encore with a brighter composition called "Becoming," part of the score for a theater work entitled "Betrothed." The concert drew to a close with this poignant, understated, sonic poem.