

Jazzwise

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**'RESPECT
YOURSELF
IN THE FACE
OF IT ALL'**

**VIJAY
IYER**

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FOR SURVIVAL**

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POST-MODERN MELTDOWN

Pianist **Vijay Iyer** cuts a singular presence on the American jazz scene. With a cerebral, but accessible post-modern style, he has made his presence felt with a run of albums featuring his own cast of collaborators. Best known for his work with altoist Rudresh Mahanthappa and Mike Ladd he won *Jazzwise* album of the year in 2004 with *In What Language?* and since then has continued to craft a singular style that makes him stand out on the sometimes hidebound American scene. **Kevin Le Gendre** talks to Vijay ahead of the release of his latest albums *Tragicomic* and *Door* and his London Jazz Festival appearance later in the year

Either elder statesmen or very successful young Turks in jazz survive by leading just one band these days. In 2008 the bulk of improvising musicians are members of groups other than the one that bears their name. They may also undertake extensive session work in pop, classical or world music.

Obvious examples of this model are David Binney, Ron Blake and Seb Rochford, all very active players who appear in such a wide variety of contexts that they would spring a surprise if they didn't periodically turn up in yet another new venture.

New York-based pianist Vijay Iyer is similarly inclined. His current activities include his own quartet, a duo with alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa known as Raw Materials and Fieldwork, a collective in which Iyer, alto saxophonist Steve Lehman and drummer Tyshawn Sorey are all "composer-members."

There is also a joint project with spoken word artist Mike Ladd and a new group, Tirtha that finds Iyer in the company of guitarist Prasanna and tabla player Nitin Mitta. Last year the pianist also made his debut as a producer, helming *The Chicago Project*, the excellent debut by alto saxophonist Matana Roberts.

A cursory glance at the highlights of some of the recordings of the aforesaid ensembles from the last decade – the quartet's *Panoptic Modes*, *Blood Sutra* and *Re-Imagining*; Fieldwork's *Your Life Flashes* and *Simulated Progress*; Iyer-Ladd's *In What Language?* and *Still Life With Commentator* – shows that Iyer has found creative spice within the variety in his life. One might nonetheless wonder whether this is a demanding existence.

"It is," the 37-year-old replies on the phone from his home in Brooklyn, New York. "I guess the thing is that some of these projects, once

they're up and running, we can go do a show and we might need a little bit of fine tuning and rehearsal but it's not like we have to create from scratch every time.

"I actually like the contrasts. It's nice to go from one thing to another because in a way each of them brings out a different side of who I am. It kind of introduces me to a new part of myself so moving among these different projects is actually a good way to stay 'whole', even though logistically, it is a challenge."

Tragicomic, the latest offering from the quartet, a cohesive ensemble in which Iyer and the aforementioned Mahanthappa are joined by the highly skilled drums and bass unit of Marcus Gilmore and Stephan Crump, presents a compelling summary of the pianist's importance as a purveyor of original thinking as well as a disciplined yet expressive soloist.

A term such as "post-modern" might appear apposite to Iyer given his ability to draw from a wide range of vocabularies within the jazz tradition. Whether his sensibilities pass for avant-garde or mainstream misses the point for Iyer is indirectly squaring the circle between Duke Ellington and Cecil Taylor, reminding us that the harmony expanding flourish of the former is part of the same creative continuum that contains the harmony dissolving whirlpools of the latter. Moreover Iyer's work has drawn extensively on the great metric complexity of non-western genres, namely Indian Carnatic music, a source that has also been instructive to Steve Coleman, the alto saxophonist with whom the pianist has performed extensively in the last decade.

At this relatively early stage of his career, Iyer, born in upstate New York to Tamil parents, has already developed a signature with marks of distinction. Rippling, perambulating arpeggios often yield strong muscular momentum in songs

where time is handled with a fluidity that leans towards that of master drummers like mridangam player Umayalpuram Sivaraman, with whom he studied in Chennai in 2001.

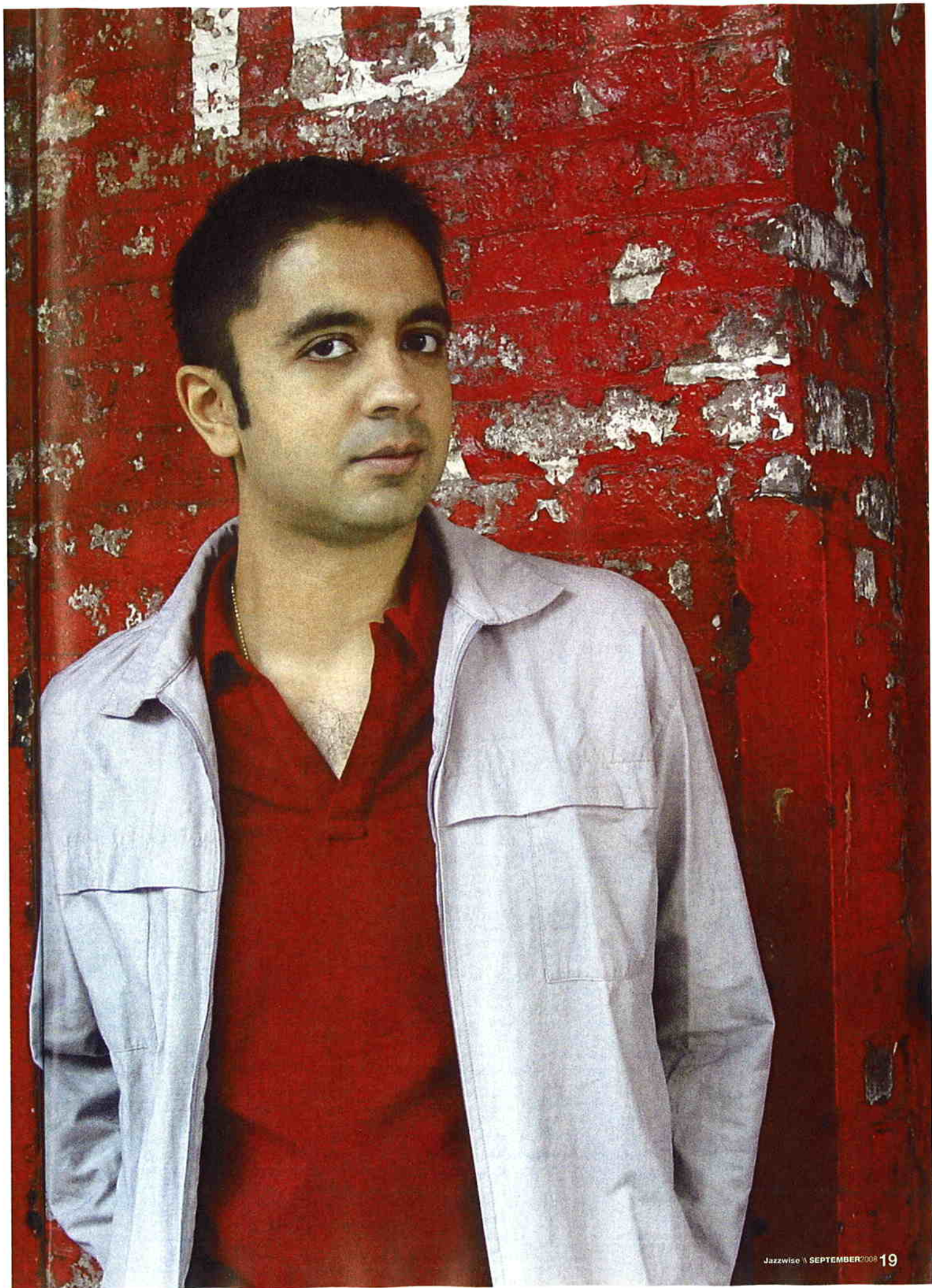
Furthermore Iyer's compositions don't always adhere to theme-variation models. Some pieces are explorations of texture that show an affinity to the collage-like creations of progressive exponents of electronica. His aesthetic prizes the character of sound as well as the narrative of sound.

Fieldwork offers a no less important view of the pianist's work because it sees him retain his expressiveness in an ensemble in which tightly mapped structure is paramount. Most of the songs on *Door*, the ensemble's latest release, have skeletal harmony and something of the ratcheting, rotating motion common to both serialist and Asian classical music. Pieces shift incrementally, nudging around a key rather than taking clearly signposted pathways to new chords.

Concision is at a premium. "Yeah, it does ending up being a dialogue with limits," Iyer concurs. "There's less of an emphasis on soloing. You could say that there's no overplaying yet at the same time we're almost all playing at all times. Most of the time all three of us are making some kind of sound but it's more that the kind of sounds we're making are about thinking contrapuntally and compositionally, not treating it as a solo showcase.

"Part of it is trying to come up with non-soloistic modes of improvisation; there's a history of that in the last 40 years; the post-Coltrane continuum as [Anthony] Braxton calls it.

"There's a whole tradition of making these collective statements that aren't about solos, so we're kind of trying to tap into that history, looking to those precedents certainly without





Still Life with Mike Ladd

trying to copy them verbatim."

With that in mind, the experiences that Iyer has as an accompanist to the likes of trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and alto saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell, both essential figures in the aforesaid heritage, still foster his artistic growth.

To identify the initial connection that the pianist made with Mitchell's music, a moment that he, with little prompting, describes as 'a huge turning point', one has to rewind to 1992. Oakland, California was Iyer's terre d'accueil. He had moved there to embark upon a PhD in physics at the University of California, Berkeley, after graduating from Yale.

At the time, Iyer, who started playing piano at the age of six before going on to join various rock bands and jazz ensembles during his college days in New York, was writing tunes that "sounded like Joe Henderson, Monk or Dave Holland". He had also formed the Sonocentric Ensemble to investigate free playing in an Ornettish or Cecil vibe but opines that he was more or less derivative. That said, he felt "his musical life blossoming significantly" as he met many artists.

Roscoe Mitchell, one of the AACM's most hardy field marshals, was one of them. He had flown to the west coast to perform at a tribute concert for the recently departed Gerald Oshita, a Japanese-American saxophonist who worked with him and vocalist Thomas Buckner in the group Sound Ensemble. "Roscoe played this solo alto piece that was mostly air; like there was almost no sound," Iyer recalls. "He played for about 15 minutes and that whole experience totally changed my life because it just sort of restructured my understanding of how to put together music.

"You could really start from the barest of raw materials and create this unbelievably intense musical experience from just working rigorously within this very small range. It's really hard to describe. It was like he was blowing and finding all these ways not to make sound.

'To me it's about this moment that we're in this absurdity that we're forced to deal with on a daily level because of the political atmosphere and the wanton abuse of power that's being shoved down our throats. That kind of got me thinking about the history of these things and also the history of this music'

– Vijay Iyer

"In a way it was almost like performance art, it had this dramatic quality, like a Samuel Beckett piece... extremely rigorous, unflinching dead serious work of art. It was such a profound experience and that's one moment that I keep coming back to."

Tours and recordings with Mitchell and allmusic agitators Burnt Sugar have furthered Iyer's development and since the millennium his own quartet has been a dynamic presence on the New York jazz scene. While the range of Iyer's formative experiences is important to acknowledge there is perhaps an equally interesting debate to be had on the way in which the pianist perceives common ground between idioms.

One creative musician may listen to another and absorb something of his modus operandi precisely because it strikes a chord waiting to be struck. Igor Stravinsky offered confirmation to Charlie Parker of harmonic solutions to the improvisational puzzles that he was in the process of negotiating. Prince became one of the last touchstones for Miles Davis because he saw in the impish little big man something of the ability to personalise sound evinced by Duke Ellington, one of the trumpeter's early muses.

Improvisers of Iyer's generation, born into the

Internet Age, the time of availability of gargantuan amounts of recordings of any kind, have access to possibly more information than any of their predecessors. Thus far the progressive voices from this history-on-tap era – Jason Moran, Craig Taborn, Robert Mitchell to take pianists alone – have not subscribed to any notions of mutual exclusivity of genres.

Moran, for example, once said that he heard the "ghettoiness" in Rachmaninoff. The loose parallels that may be heard between Iyer's music and the minimalism of Philip Glass or Steve Reich could pertain to a shared ancestral source. "I think the thing is those guys are interested in the same stuff that I'm interested in... which is African and Indian music," Iyer comments.

"They're tuned into rhythmic dynamics from around the world, not just the European classical tradition. All that is true for them and all that is true for me too. They deal with resonance in a way that I hear a connection with Indian music. You have that harmonic stasis to such a degree like you get the whole room reverberating to that one sound."

An energy rush, then, is the ultimate goal. Whether Iyer is constantly sub-dividing the beat so that the 'one' is in flux or producing thick, wedge-like chords that become dark, dense drones, the aim is to stream all the notes into a single force.

As far as the pianist's recordings go, the art of playing is not the only driver in this creative agenda. The science of the studio has its place and traditions of producer-led music have been hugely instructive to Iyer in this respect, none more so than Jamaican dub.

Indeed, it has been a pervasive force in the pianist's life following stints living in Harlem and Brooklyn where communities from 'The Rock' have seen one of their great artistic gifts to the world impact on local culture.

Iyer's focus on the aural landscape as well as the story in his music reflects this absorption to a large extent. Hence it stands to reason that he has paid great attention to the engineering process in the creation of his CDs. Scotty Hard, collaborator of such luminaries as Teo Macero, Wu Tang Clan and Prince Paul, has been a key component of the pianist's work in this respect. He co-produced *In What Language?* and *Still Life With Commentator* with Iyer and Mike Ladd and also mixed both sets as well as *Tragicomic* and *Re-Imagining*.

Deploying relatively basic, vintage gear in the studio such as plate reverb, space echo and a desk that once belonged to Bill Laswell, Hard has helped Iyer to craft the most effective sonic environment for his work, a finely graduated, very detailed spectrum of high, middle and low frequencies.

"I wanted somebody who could deal with a blend of acoustic and electronic sounds and get good drum sounds," Iyer explains. "Scotty was a really important connection to make. I was looking for someone who could think beyond the way a typical jazz engineer works.

"In the past when I worked with engineers more used to doing traditional jazz records there would always be a tug of war over how loud the drums would be 'cos I like a lot of drums. To me they're the centre of the music and everything else orbits around them. If you push them into the background and all you hear is a hint of ride cymbal you're missing out on the most beautiful instrument. It's not necessarily about transcending jazz but having this more expansive view of what it is.

"So we tried things. On a song like 'Threnody' for example, at the end Rudresh's saxophone kind of multiplies in space, so it becomes a drone that haunts the song. The mastering engineer said it was a 'Pink Floyd moment' but we're using the technology of dub to do this sort of thing.

"In a lot of ways dub is an unspoken but deeply influential force in American urban life. When you talk about minimalism I think of minimalism not as an -ism, it's not about recourse to Glass and Adams. It's more about working with the bare minimum of formal elements and spinning that into something that's very strong." That's dub, though?

"Right, dub is minimalism before the fact; the original minimalism. And also it's improvised. This is Lee 'Scratch' Perry improvising at the mixing board; it's improvising with texture. To me, when I hear dub, I can really hear the hands on the desk, I really hear the body in it.

"It's nothing super fancy, it's just a tradition, it's rich and we draw on it on *Tragicomic*. I mean there's a moment in 'Comin' Up' where we dropped in a moment's delay on the piano and also on 'Without Lions', there's a sort of a hole in the song. I wanted to deepen the hole, create an echo, turn the hole into a canyon for about a second and a half. You get to that moment and suddenly you're peering into the abyss."

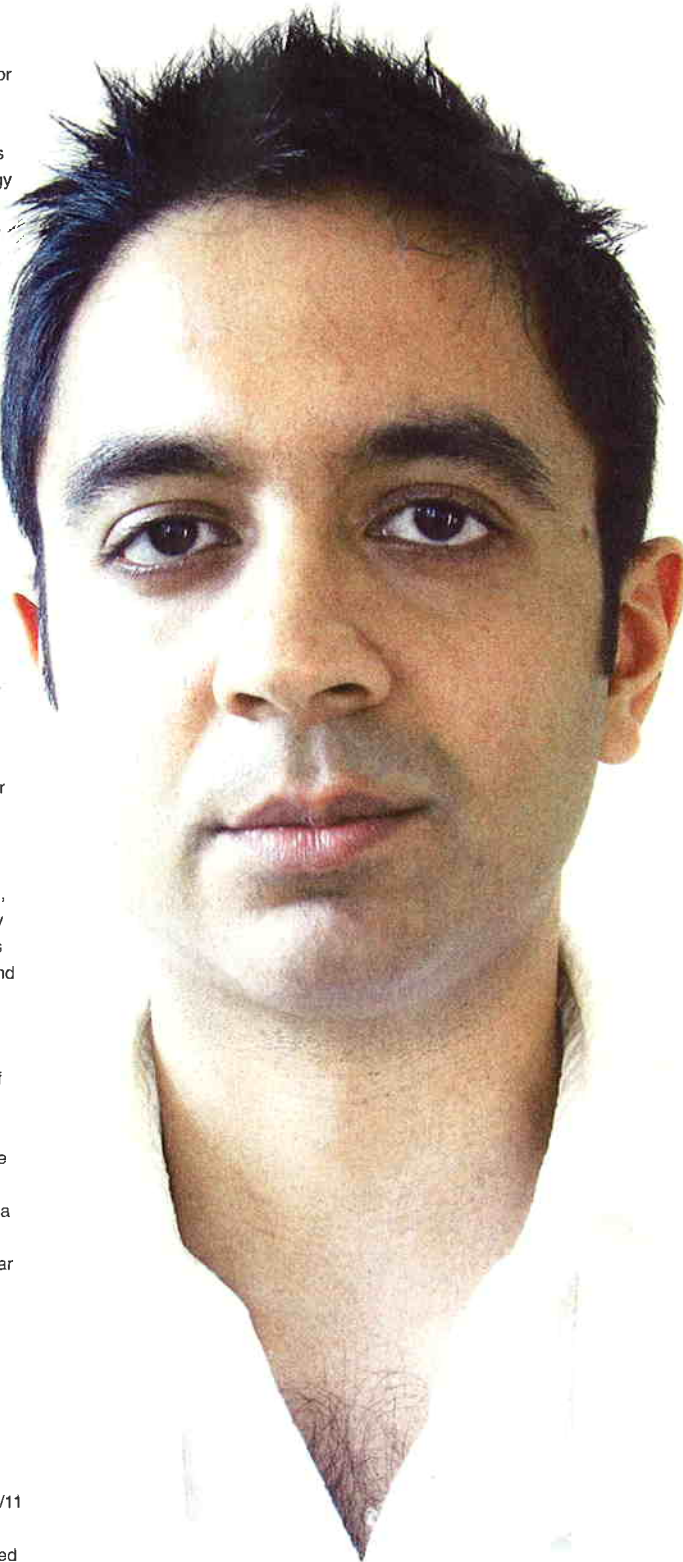
Moments such as these conspire to make *Tragicomic* a record with a fair amount of unsettling, thought-provoking overtones. This builds coherently on Iyer's songbook to date, a body of work that has seen him broach several important socio-cultural and political subjects that either directly or indirectly affect him.

As the son of Indian immigrants, he has experienced first hand the ambiguity of the place of minority communities in America and has acknowledged some of the more shocking events that frame that experience. For example the savage beating of Rishi Maharaj, who was set upon by neighbours in Brooklyn for the simple fact of being a person of colour inspired 'Invocation', one of the most intensely moving compositions created thus far by the pianist.

Another starting point for music was the scandalous case of Jafar Panahi, the Iranian filmmaker who was shackled to a bench at JFK airport by the INS before being deported for no apparent reason. Iyer and Mike Ladd created the acclaimed oratorio *In What Language?* to address such humiliations and dehumanising abuses of power in America. They made the point that post-9/11 paranoia started in pre-9/11 iniquity.

Tragicomic was not initially borne of a concerted desire to make a political statement. Yet the songs nonetheless reflect on the disorientating if not absurd nature of contemporary life in which decision makers have racked up crimes and misdemeanours both on the national and international stage that take backsliding to Rabelaisian proportions.

"A lot of the music was created a couple of years ago. It was a commissioned suite of music actually. The commission came from Chamber Music America," Iyer clarifies. "I intended to do something more formal and as I got into writing the music I was like 'well, that's not where I'm at right now because that's not where the world is at right now.' It's such an emotionally potent toxic atmosphere that I couldn't ignore it.





"To me it's about this moment that we're in this absurdity that we're forced to deal with on a daily level because of the political atmosphere and the wanton abuse of power that's being shoved down our throats. That kind of got me thinking about the history of these things and also the history of this music."

In the album's booklet, Iyer has written a short text in which he evokes "our perilous moment of global transition". He also quotes the African-American scholar Cornel West's statement that survival depends on the need to be "buffered by ritual, cushioned by community or sustained by art."

Author of influential tomes such as *Beyond Eurocentrism*, West has expressed trenchant views on race relations and cultural affairs from both a domestic and global perspective for decades and has shown the courage of his convictions in no small measure, ending up in jail in 1987 for taking part in campus protests for divestment in South Africa while at Yale Divinity School.

"I think that West was an important frame to put around the album," Iyer comments. "This idea about *Tragicomic* that he is talking about... it's looking at the moment in history that gave birth to the aesthetic of the blues; it's something that Leroi Jones also talks about in *Blues People*.

"West looks at the history of slavery as this tragic encounter with the absurd and asks what are the strategies for survival in the face of something like that. I'm not descended from people who suffered those injustices but that history haunts all of us especially as Americans.

"It's part of the fabric of the country. And also I come from people who were colonised so there's a resonance for me in terms of my own approach to this music and my rationale for doing it. So the tragicomic perspective is a way of surviving and weathering these storms to turn back around and respect yourself in the face of it all."

Absurdity, tragedy and perhaps un-reality in the *Reality Show* age stand as appropriate terms to

describe both the state of the world and the priorities of the zeitgeist. It's interesting to note how the current economic woe that dominates the national news agenda has been neatly disconnected from expectations of belt-tightening that usually loom large in the national psyche during times of military conflict.

America and Britain are at war and a burden is forcibly placed on budgets as a result, especially when governments are obliged to pay out £3m for the murder of Iraqi civilians such as Baha Moussa by Coalition forces tasked with peacekeeping amid the insurgency.

Decades ago there was an assumption that everyman would make small sacrifices for the war effort. However, somewhat grotesquely, the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns have been largely abstracted from consciousness in the West. We're locked in harrowing mortal combat with another nation but it's somewhere else, somewhere over there, somewhere foreign.

"Sure, but it's gonna come back at us," Iyer presages. "It already has. In the US we're talking about nearly 300,000 soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other hundreds of thousands of them with traumatic brain injuries.

"These people are being brought back here to supposedly participate in a society where their healthcare is being denied them... basically they're being abused, having lived through this nightmare and there's no support system for them.

"But we're gonna be hearing from them in one way or another. Eventually they're going to be making music or writing. It's already happening. And we're also going to be encountering them on the streets and we're gonna have to deal with all the repercussions of all of this in our daily lives.

"To me, that's the most staggering thing; we've done this to our children and we're still somehow not owning up to it. What can an artist do in the face of all of this? In a way it's even absurd to contemplate it."

Creating music has become for Iyer "temporary respite or catharsis" but he recognises that his endeavours do not fundamentally impact on national politics or cause 'a revolution in themselves.' That said, he has not given up hope, or the audacity thereof.

In the last six months, dozens of American musicians – Dianne Reeves, Wyclef Jean and George Clinton to name but some – have declared support for Barack Obama during their concerts. America's first black President is a prospect that Clinton may not have truly believed possible when he envisioned 'Chocolate City' way back when and generally speaking the Chicago senator seems to enjoy a fair amount of support among the Stateside artistic community. In any case the pianist is, like the aforementioned, right behind him.

"I think he can do it," says Iyer of Obama's White House potential. "A lot of people are totally disgusted with the current administration.

"I don't know... at some level nobody can imagine McCain winning because he's a totally unhinged, out-of-it kind of guy. I just can't imagine that happening to us again so I think there's a lot of opposition.

"It ends up being a generational shift in the fundamental dynamics of American politics because, as Obama put it himself, 'some people say that they're gonna stay home rather than vote for me' but 'I say that people are coming out in record numbers who've never voted before'. I think he's inspiring people. So there's that kind of change."

Time is possibly not on Obama's side though. Iyer is greatly suspicious of the power of both the media and opposition marketing teams in the election game. In the liner notes of *Still Life With Commentator*, Iyer and Mike Ladd identified the "daily data storms" unleashed in a world in which the body of news, pumped up with the steroids of the blogosphere and Youtube, can run faster, jump higher and kick up more dust on the track of public opinion than ever before.

"Even *The New York Times*, they seem to come up with a new hit piece on the guy every day and it's a relatively left-leaning newspaper," Iyer points out emphatically.

"Generally, people just keep doing things to hurt him, like the latest thing being the Muslim women who want to wear headscarves and sit behind him while he makes a speech. And supposedly they were told that they couldn't sit behind him because it would raise flags to the wrong people, so he had to go and apologise to them.

"It's like people are being put up to this. But I think most people of colour know the deal. They know that we basically have to clench our teeth and deal with a bunch of lies just so we can get through this election. When two Muslim women come out of the woodwork and say they were slighted by Obama, I have to say that I really smell something funny. So he's ahead but there's a lot of time to chip away at his lead with all this bullshit. That's what I'm worried about, but I think that fundamentally Americans are ready on some level.

"It's just that there are very powerful interests who would like to stand in the way. And that's what we have to be able to fight," he says, a harder edge in his tone. "It seems that people are up for a fight though. So I'm optimistic." ■

Vijay plays with Rudresh Mahanthappa at the London Jazz Festival on 16 November at the Purcell Room