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POSTED: NOV. 22, 2009

Iyer trio's new 'Historicity' draws from eclectic sources

BY MARK STRYKER

FREE PRESS MUSIC CRITIC

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There's no single answer to the question of what's happening in jazz right now, but "Historicity" by the kinetic trio led by pianist **Vijay Iyer** represents one reasonable place to start (** out of four stars, ACT).



A lot of ideas that have been floating around jazz for the past decade find a compelling distillation here. Rhythmically the music deals in odd meters and dense textures anchored in souped-up funk, hip-hop and idioms from Africa, India and Latin America. Individual voices pursue aggressively independent paths. Prickly improvisations eschew standard forms without abandoning discipline or historical references. The repertoire makes a post-modern statement, too, in its heady range, from a vamp-based take on Bernstein's "Somewhere," to overlooked jazz compositions by mavericks Andrew Hill and Julius Hemphill, to pieces by [Stevie Wonder](#) and M.I.A.

What is especially captivating is how Iyer, bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore phrase as one, even when tracking different rhythmic orbits around the pulse. On the title track, a puzzle-box composition by Iyer, the players suggest unstable atoms. Iyer's discursive rumbling ricochets off the drums and vice versa. Crump's bass sometimes hooks up with one or the other of his colleagues or sets its own course. The feedback loop continually refreshes itself.

Hill's "Smoke Stack" is a standout, as Iyer's slippery lines and dark harmonies wink at the composer while also revealing Iyer's liquid fluidity and formidable technique; his virtuosity is matched by Crump and Gilmore. Weaknesses? Well, Iyer's [music](#) is more interesting rhythmically than it is harmonically and melodically, and his improvisations can stall in a kind of gray, generic wash. But the trio's tug of inevitability often pulls you back into the vortex.

Bobby Hutcherson's "Wise One" takes its title from a lyrical [John Coltrane](#) composition, but it could also apply to the veteran vibraphonist himself, who paces his improvisations beautifully on this Coltrane tribute (**, Kind of Blue). The direct simplicity with which Hutcherson phrases the tender melody of "Dear Lord," adding just a few well-placed ornaments and hesitations and then



The new CD from pianist Vijay Iyer's trio includes compositions by Stevie Wonder and M.I.A. (CHRIS DRUKKER)

A version of this story appears on page 8K of the Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

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