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Vijay Iyer says that in his jazz trio, "everyone is contributing structural information."

By **BEN RATLIFF**
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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

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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.’ ”

A version of this article appeared in print on September 13, 2009, on page AR64 of the New York edition.

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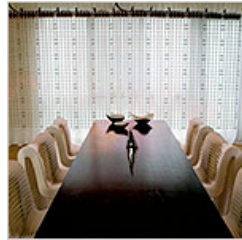


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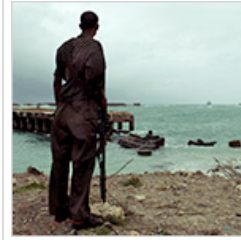
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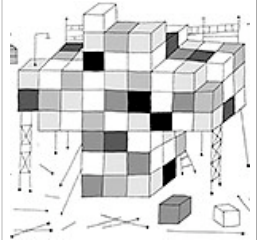
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