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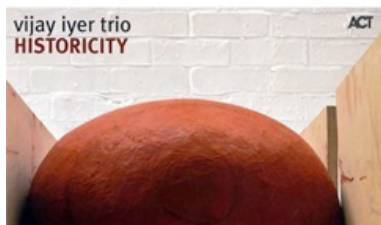
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Album review: Vijay Iyer Trio's 'Historicity'

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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(The Act Company)

Three and a half stars (Out of four)

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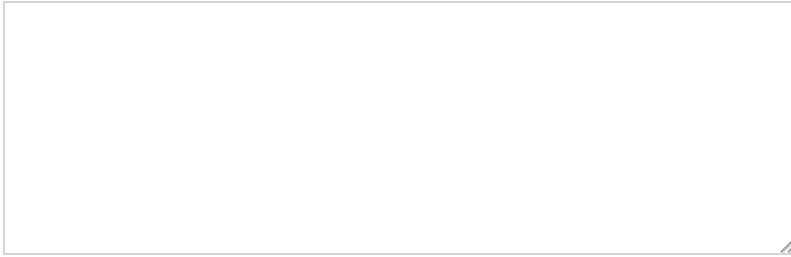
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