

## Losing Jazz's Preconceptions With 'Historicity'

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Pianist-composer Vijay Iyer (right), drummer Marcus Gilmore (center) and bassist Stephan Crump are the members of the Vijay Iyer Trio.

November 9, 2009 - In the last few years, some enterprising younger players have reinvented the piano-bass-drums jazz combo. It's not just that these trios play contemporary pop; it's also a shift in attitude. [Vijay Iyer's](#) trio doesn't worry about swinging all the time, although the buoyancy of swing inflects its rhythms as much as hip-hop does. Some great pianists treat the instrument as a whispering sylvan harp. But Iyer treats piano — or the piano trio — like a boom box: a rhythm machine. In [Stevie Wonder's](#) "Big Brother," Iyer reminds us that jazz versions of radio pop are nothing new, sneaking in a quote from [Ramsey Lewis'](#) '60s hit "The In Crowd."

*Historicity* includes some good Iyer tunes,

including a couple of his own oldies, but they're trumped by his readings of fellow composers' stuff. One more way Iyer breaks with tradition — or, rather, reconnects to an older jazz tradition — is by improvising from the melody more than a song's underlying chords. In [Leonard Bernstein's](#) "Somewhere," Iyer uses limber touch and timing to surprise you just playing the melody. If that weren't enough, bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore ride two separate swing grooves.

Iyer also covers a too-obscure jazz classic, the title track from one of the great un-reissued '70s albums, saxophonist Julius Hemphill's "Dogon A.D." The trio re-orchestrates the arid melody, but catches every rhythmic twist and hiccup in the original; bassist Crump gets the bluesy groan of Hemphill cellist Abdul Wadud.

What's so impressive about Vijay Iyer's trio isn't that it plays venerable standards, forgotten jazz classics or hip-hop-inflected pop — it's that it hears all that as part of a single continuum, material equally adaptable to its methods. That's another way to say that *Historicity* treats jazz like living music. It's still breathing.

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