

Take Five's Top 10 Jazz Records Of 2009



Enlarge

Jimmy Katz

Vijay Iyer.

December 6, 2009 - Looking back on 2009, much of the focus naturally falls on younger musicians. Maybe they're just fresh in our minds because *A Blog Supreme* spent so much time addressing ways to get twentysomethings into modern jazz via the *Jazz Now* series. But folks like Vijay Iyer seemed ubiquitous, and with good reason: He made a standards record that didn't try to claim new jazz standards. *Historicity's* choices — songs and interpretations alike — spoke the same language to him, and we picked up on the translations.

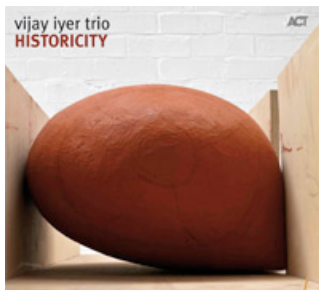
But for all the *younger jazz players* — including Iyer, Darcy James Argue and Tyshawn Sorey —

key records also evoked bygone jazz eras and catalogs with such creativity that they might signal a new wave of New Orleans and Brazilian jazz.

Take Five reached out to our regular contributors and ringers for their favorite jazz albums of 2009; they're presented below in no particular order.

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TAKE FIVE'S TOP 10 JAZZ RECORDS OF 2009



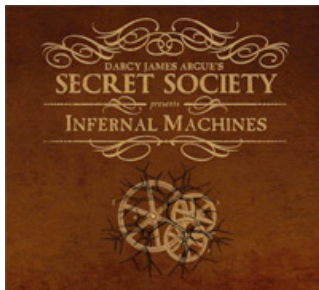
Vijay Iyer Trio *Artist:* Vijay Iyer

Album: *Historicity*

Song: *Somewhere*

Two definitions of the word "historicity" are listed in the liner notes of *Vijay Iyer's* CD of the same title: 1) "the quality of being historically factual, as opposed to fictitious or legendary"; and 2) "a condition of being placed in the stream of history, also: a result of such placement." How can Iyer's *Historicity* be defined? It is a reflection and re-awakening of jazz past, as well as a push into the future that still lives in the now. Or something like that. With a song like *Leonard Bernstein's* "Somewhere" (from *West Side Story*), the melody is here, but it's unlike any version of the song I've heard recorded. It's updated and re-imagined in a modern but totally accessible way. Some say that Iyer's music is too complicated to "understand" or "get," but this song helps serve as a gateway into his aural world. "Somewhere" helps listeners gain an appreciation of the trio's approach and dive into the rest of the album from there. All of the songs on *Historicity*, from electronic-pop artist *M.I.A.'s* "Galang" to *Stevie Wonder's* "Big Brother" to Iyer's original compositions from a few years past showcase his formidable talents as an arranger, de-constructionist and re-imaginer. Bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore flesh out all of the ideas seamlessly. Enjoy the journey, don't try to "understand" it, and let the trio take you into unfamiliar territory. --*Shaunna Morrison Machosky, WDUQ*

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Darcy James Argue's Secret Society

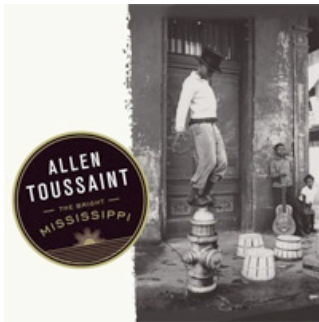
Album: *Infernal Machines*

Song: *Redeye*

Add *Darcy James Argue* to the short list of composers beating up on the jazz big-band format -- particularly one that has been warped by tradition and trapped in the amber of the Swing Era. There's no heedless devotion to repertory here. Argue makes his Secret Society debut with *Infernal Machines*, and he introduces a band that pulses like a steam locomotive. His compositions don't punk the idea of jazz orchestra. Instead, they expand its source code to include organized sound from today and references beyond the time when large ensembles were de facto.

Elements of classical minimalism, anthemic rock, and Ellingtonia meet a cast of improvisers who make this jazz in every way. It would be a shame to keep this kind of originality a secret. --*Josh Jackson, WBGO's The Checkout*

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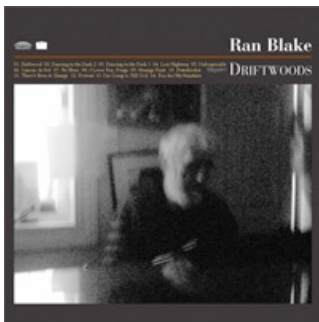
Allen Toussaint

Album: Bright Mississippi

Song: Bright Mississippi

Let us return to a time when jazz was truly the music of the "streets," where the rhythms moved in time to the times, where emotion and a visceral feel were the benchmarks of appreciation, and where New Orleans was the center of this musical universe. If there was anyone who could appropriate this sound today through the combination of experience and local oral transmission, it would be **Allen Toussaint**, the longtime NOLA pianist, songwriter, arranger and record producer. Producer **Joe Henry** says that Toussaint's musical approach was "reaching back to look forward." Sitting down for a few days in the studio with a stellar band -- featuring musicians like **Don Byron**, **Nicholas Payton** and **Marc Ribot** -- Toussaint channels the 21st century back into the early 20th, with inspiring takes on the works of **Sidney Bechet**, **Louis Armstrong** and **Jelly Roll Morton** and their heirs. It's a superb recording, with soulful performances all around. --*Nick Francis, Jazz24*

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Ran Blake

Album: Driftwoods

Song: Lost Highway

If there are ghosts in music, pianist **Ran Blake** finds them and stretches their abstract melodies into the ether. On *Driftwoods*, Blake focuses on singers such as Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson and Hank Williams, re-imagining their vocal performances as an apparition and celebrating their cadences, though more often inverting them with hauntingly beautiful keystrokes. --*Lars Gotrich, NPR Music*

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BUIKA EL ÚLTIMO TRAGO CON LA COLABORACIÓN DE CHUCHO VALDES



Buika & Chucho Valdes

Album: Ultimo Trago

Song: Ciudades

If only we could open up a Barcelona/New York/Havana touring circuit, then we wouldn't be missing out on some cool, genre-redefining collaborations between Cuban musicians and those in Spain. Bassist and producer Javier Limon has been a behind-the-scenes presence on many of the jazz recordings from Spain that have been turning heads. Limon paired **Chucho Valdes**, the legendary Cuban pianist, with Afro flamenco jazz vocalist **Concha Buika**, who goes by her last name only, for a record dedicated to Mexican *ranchera* singer Chavela Vargas. Valdes accompanies like the best jazz pianists. Buika bends notes, belts it out, coos, does that cool Moorish-influenced flamenco vocal trill and laments like the best jazz ballad singers with a dark, rich voice that commands attention. *El Ultimo Trago* certainly blurs the lines between genres. Or maybe it's just reminding us of what jazz, Cuban rhythms and flamenco have in common: Africa. Whatever: It's the one CD that made me stop in my tracks during a year full of great music. --*Felix Contreras, NPR Arts Desk*

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Nels Cline

Album: Coward

Song: Thurston County



Though best known for his shredding solos with the rock band [Wilco](#), [Nels Cline](#) is a guitarist's guitarist: a shape-shifting musician who skillfully inhabits any musical setting. Cline has long been a hero as a session player and in the underground improvisational and experimental pop-music scenes. But with *Coward*, Cline overdubs his guitars and other instruments into complex tapestries of slowly evolving meditations. While not a "jazz" album in a traditional sense, *Coward* shares a common harmonic language and improvisational spirit, inspired by ECM recordings and avant-garde compositions. *Coward* is a stunningly beautiful record that synthesizes elements of rock, Asian folk music, spacious country and minimalism in a wholly original way. --*Mike Katzif, NPR Music*

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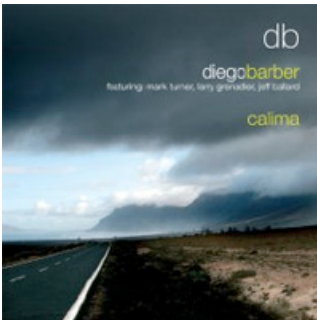
JD Allen Trio *Artist:* J.D. Allen Trio

Album: Shine!

Song: Marco Polo

Tenor saxophonist [JD Allen](#) has a concept, but little of the usual fuss accompanying the "conceptual." He challenges his trio to make simple tunes come alive quickly; his compositions sound as if he's plucked the choicest bits of classic period [John Coltrane](#), then scrambled and reconstituted them as dense, two- to five-minute snack foods. Catchy, even hummable, Allen's nuggets also feel harmonically open, and with that great liberty comes great responsibility for the rhythm section. Happily, Gregg August (bass) and Rudy Royston (drums) are a perfect match. Their hailstorms of sound (with hurricane eyes for the ballads) keenly envelop rather than drown out their leader's saxophone tessellations. It makes for an addictive brew, as administered in potent, bite-sized doses. --*Patrick Jarenwattananon, NPR Music's A Blog Supreme*

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Diego Barber

Album: Calima

Song: Piru

I don't know if I can say that *Calima* is "The Best Jazz Record of 2009," but I can certainly say that it was one of the sweetest surprises for me. Diego Barber is a wonderfully imaginative guitarist who plays improvisational music on a nylon-stringed instrument. Like kindred spirit [Ralph Towner](#), Barber is classically trained. He was born in Lanzarote, the easternmost of the Canary Islands. His mother pushed classical music, but he got an electric guitar when he was 10, at which point the struggle began. Barber resolves it well on *Calima*. The opener, "Piru," is a good example: It's a quartet performance which features saxophonist [Mark Turner](#), bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jeff Ballard. It begins in a Towneresque fashion, but then Barber introduces a classical/folkloric theme that transports you to someplace between the Madrid where he studied and the New York where he now lives. Diego Barber takes you to a place born of a volcano -- made up mostly of mountains, desert, and beaches -- where the dry Saharan air settles and lifts you into a dream. --*Tom Cole, NPR Arts Desk*

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Tyshawn Sorey

Album: Koan

Song: Awakening

The quiet and reflective are rare qualities of improvised music -- or at least they're rare when done well. Exploration in this realm often goes straight for the gut, so when musicians choose silence as their guide, there's almost more to unpack. Drummer Tyshawn Sorey prefers this approach, nodding to the minimalism of [Morton Feldman](#). But what makes *Koan* such a success is not its intent, but the way Sorey, guitarist Todd Neufield and bassist/acoustic guitarist Thomas Morgan use space as a composer. In

"Awakening," Neufield lets his guitar ring out, bending the neck and letting harmonics fill out a room as if [Derek Bailey](#) were playing on Talk Talk's spiritual opus *Laughing Stock*. Sorey himself barely touches his kit, pausing over cymbals and toms, while Morgan pulses his bass. But *Koan* doesn't concern itself with individual performance; instead, it's a collective of one sound, one mind. --*Lars Gotrich, NPR Music*

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Fred Hersch

Album: Fred Hersch Plays Jobim

Song: Brigas Nunca Mais

[Fred Hersch](#)'s gifts are considerable, whether he's interpreting Monk, Richard Rodgers, Ornette Coleman or, yes, even Fred Hersch. He always finds the challenging and the beautiful in his source material. His latest exploration is all Jobim, and with the exception of one track with percussionist Jamey Haddad, it's a solo flight of the highest order. He takes to the skies, sometimes in a romantic tradition, but most often in layered, polyrhythmic workouts. Both modus operandi remind us why he's a piano player's piano player. Hersch re-harmonizes, syncopates and makes deft choices for his improvs in these Brazilian songs -- whether the commensurate Desafinado, Insensatez and Corcovado, or my favorite, "Brigas Nunca Mais." This record is my top 2009 pick because Hersch reminds me why I started paying attention to him 15 years ago on a collection of Johnny Mandel tunes; his portraiture is not mere recitation, but rather intimate, memorable and masterful works of art adapted from another master's works of art. --*Walter Ray Watson, NPR Senior Producer*

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Michael Brumitt (RSPTN) wrote:

No Joshua Redman?
No Terence Blanchard?
No Christian McBride?
No Miguel Zenon?
No live Freddie Hubbard?
December 8, 2009 4:18:09 PM EST

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Jerry Withrow (ubik333) wrote:

Yes!
Couldn't agree more with Felix's choice of the Buika/Valdes collaboration. Saw Chucho here a few years ago. Finally seeing Buika would be a dream come true.
December 8, 2009 2:11:56 PM EST

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Mike Webber (Zebtron) wrote:

My two cents:
Trio 3 with Geri Allen-At This Time
Han Bennink Trio-Parken
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Joe Morris Quartet-Today On Earth
Vandermark 5-Annular Gift
Denman Maroney Quintet-Identity
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