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Today is Wednesday December 16, 2009

### [Vijay Iyer's fascinating rhythms \(CD review\)](#)

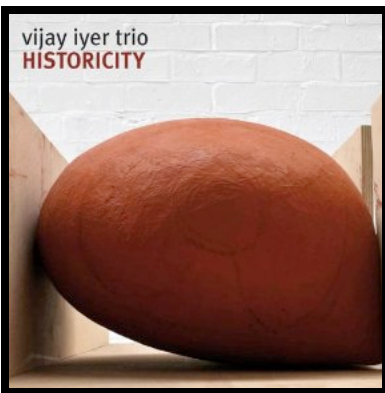
By [phum](#) Thu, Oct 22 2009 [COMMENTS\(4\)](#) [Jazzblog.ca](#)

Filed under: [CD reviews](#), [Vijay Iyer](#)

The most fascinating jazz-related newspaper article that I've read in quite some time is this [one](#) from the *Guardian* last week, by the U.S. pianist Vijay Iyer. In it, Iyer explains the influence of mathematics and much more on his music.

It follows then that the most fascinating jazz CD that I've heard in quite some time is also from Iyer. It's his new trio disc, *Historicity*, about which [the jazz interweb's been buzzing](#) for some weeks now. (I set hands on my review copy only last weekend.)

*Historicity* is as good as its many smart and passionate advocates affirm. It hits me initially as a paradigm shift, although that reflects more my limited terms of reference. It's more correct, I feel, to think of *Historicity* as a great work that operates



parallel to the jazz piano priorities of, say, Brad Mehldau or (definitely) Keith Jarrett, who are more Eurocentric and harmonically oriented, or of, say, Monty Alexander and Gerald Clayton, to name an old master and a young one, who re-affirm a classic, timeless way of swinging.

One reason why Iyer's music is so admirable is that it is so much a music of his own defining. I hear Iyer's playing as hard-

hitting and ruggedly hewn, all the while awash in unique, visceral rhythms, measured dissonance, and intrigue. The music is provocative, but without trying to be provocative. It's just itself. Put it this way: Drummer Marcus Gilmore, who is in Iyer's trio, is Roy Haynes' grandson, while Iyer, in a fashion, is Thelonious Monk's progeny.

*Historicity* is concerned with covering music. Iyer's trio tackles songs by Stevie Wonder, Leonard Bernstein, Julius Hemphill, Andrew Hill, M.I.A. and indeed, some of Iyer's older compositions. However, Iyer, bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Gilmore -- a potent trio whose members share an expansive vision of an ever-evolving, richly interactive music -- are unrestrained when it comes to re-imagining the material, and indeed, focusing on the political aspect of the source material via musical means.

In his lucid liner notes, Iyer draws attention to the "disruptive quality" that many of the source songs share, adding that "each cover becomes a conversation between the original work and something else entirely. The best word for it is "versioning." (I wrote [here](#) last summer about bad liner notes that I feel can detract from my appreciation of music, and it's telling to note that Iyer contributed a comment about what good liner notes can do to explain an artist's motivations and objectives. He practices what he preaches, and I heartily approve.) Not that pondering the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci or the late U.S. psychologist J.J. Gibson, whose names are dropped in Iyer's liner notes, is required to enjoy *Historicity*.

A few comments on some of the tracks:

Iyer's take on Leonard Bernstein's *Somewhere* is deliciously subversive, yet true to the metaphorical power of the lyric's "There's a place for us/Somewhere a place for us." Iyer's trio takes what was previously a romantic ballad, sets it to rugged 4/4 beat and goes to town, using just as much of the song's original harmonic structure as needed. Fred Hersch, the fabulously harmonic, romantic pianist has also played *Somewhere* -- in a much more classic, less deconstructive fashion -- and the song's "a place for us" lyrics resonated all the more because Hersch is a gay man living with AIDS. Iyer, I feel, takes possession of the song to convey -- at least for himself -- a message that visible, cultural minorities call out for respect and understanding.

In covering the multicultural, hip-hopping confection *Galang*, by M.I.A, Iyer audaciously asserts his affinity for our here and now. The results are exhilarating. Roll video:



*Mystic Brew* is remarkable for what Iyer does to the touchstone rhythmic figure of jazz, the Charleston figure. (If you don't read music, it may suffice to say that this rhythmic figure animates not only the melody of the old song *Charleston*, but also the chord punches of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*. It is so vital because the second chord in each bar anticipates the next downbeat, giving the music forward motion. One last point: the mathematical ratio of a Charleston figure is 3:5, measured in eighth notes). In the 1970s, the soul-jazz pianist Ronnie Foster combined that rhythm, along with some pretty hip chords, to compose *Mystic Brew*. Iyer's application of his trio to the song is a delight. He, Crump and Gilmore gives the material the musical and rhythmic equivalent of a Thai massage. The song's initial 10 seconds or so have become lodged in my memory, and I find myself going back to the track to hear and enjoy how Iyer's trio takes that material on such a journey.

Indeed, I look back and see that Iyer gave a lucid not-too-technical explanation in his *Guardian* article (skip the next paragraph if you prefer to hear *Mystic Brew*'s coolness sans de-mystification.)

*In our version of Mystic Brew, we work with that asymmetry [the Charleston's 3:5 ratio - PH] and move it through Fibonacci-like transformations. We perform an asymmetric "stretch" that maintains the same "golden" balance over the entire measure. But we don't transform simply by multiplying, as you might when shifting from duple to triple meter, or when doubling the quantities of a recipe, say. Rather, we try to preserve an "impression" of the original – the short-and-long-ness of it – to see if we can this way achieve that feeling of similarity.*

*Smoke Stack*, finds Iyer playing at its most linear. That is, he spins long lines over Andrew Hill's composition, and indeed, of *Historicity*'s tracks this track is most closely identifiable with its original. Like Hill's source material, Iyer's rendition is

compelling and energetic, chock full of content. Of interest to me is that Iyer's rhythmic feel is more skittery and tumbling than conventionally flowing. (He may trace Hill as an antecedent in this regard.) So if your jazz-piano preconception box includes the long, surging flow of folks such as Oscar Peterson, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett and Brad Mehldau -- and only that -- well, Iyer might rub you the wrong way. That would be your loss.

I'll single out just one more track, or rather an aspect of one track. On *Segment for Sentiment No. 2* Iyer plays some gorgeous, well-struck chords behind Crump. They had a big impact on me, like an almost overdue dose of more conventional beauty before Iyer's trio was to bid farewell.

I've told you a lot about how I hear *Historicity*. However, I feel I've just scratched the surface.

Overall, Iyer strikes me as not terribly concerned with harmony as it has accrued over centuries of Western musical tradition. There are no echoes of Schubert, Debussy, Satie, or rigorous voice-leading from him. Leave that for the others. Indeed, in his liner notes, Iyer writes: "all of our music draws influence from the musical traditions of South Asia, Africa, and their diasporas," from which I infer that an artist has to focus and even exclude -- too many ingredients could throw the stew's balance out of whack. Nor is Iyer an Oscar Peterson-style freight train swinger.

But it's much more important to zoom in on who Iyer is. His music blossoms on its own terms into something with vigor and rigor. It has a tremendous sense of common purpose and lots of emotional range. It certainly has rhythm and groove, in an organic and innovative way, and it has tension and release. Iyer has put considerable thought into building his music, but it is not cerebral -- although it will make you think. In short, all can latch on to this new-sounding music if they have open, curious ears.

*Historicity* is quite unlike the excellent jazz that is squarely in my comfort zone and which satisfies me almost immediately (Brian Blade, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Donny McCaslin, Terence Blanchard for example). And yet, I won't hesitate to rank it highly when I compile my best discs of 2009 list, not only because of its merits, but also because it's enlarged my musical horizons. Offhand, I can't remember the last jazz recording that rocked my world as *Historicity* has.

\*\*\*

**Somewhat rambling metacritical postscript:** It might surprise some that I, a jazz critic for the last 15 or so years and pianist for twice that long, have taken this long to at last check out and dig Iyer, who is such an interesting pianist and artist. I'm definitely late to the party, and arguably, my review suffers from my inability to situate *Historicity* in the body of Iyer's work. Here are my explanations. If you'd prefer not to read them, well, [here](#) is a video of a cat drinking from a faucet. It's from Nate Chinen's excellent blog, [The Gig](#). Kenny Dorham's *Lotus Blossom* plays in the background while the cat slakes its thirst. Yes, too much jazz from time to time renders us crazy and/or punch-drunk stupid.

Finished checking out the thirsty cat yet?

As a critic, I am a part-timer. At the *Ottawa Citizen*, I have many more responsibilities that in fact come first. Except during jazz festival time, music writing has always come second to, over the years, things like covering murder trials, writing about Ottawa's tech sector after the bubble burst, assigning stories, supervising and editing my colleagues, determining where stories run in sections, collaborating with page designers and writing headlines. I'm a jazz specialist -- and thankful, for example, that the paper sent me to San Francisco in 2002 to interview Herbie Hancock in person (and write about Google, and about culinary icon Alice Waters) -- but I'm a generalist journalistically. So, I've been constrained in my jazz investigations, which include getting to know the music of Iyer, whom I must admit I saw perform several years ago in Ottawa (My reaction was "I need to check this guy out! He's saying something." but that just didn't happen). What I'm saying is that my jazz criticism doesn't happen in a vacuum or in days of infinite hours. However, since February 2008, maintaining this blog, which has been so fortunate to find readers far and wide, has pushed me to go deeper as a jazz investigator.

Meanwhile, as a pianist, I've used what time I have to pursue, at my own level, a different path, a different lineage with different musicians than those whom I believe most inform Iyer. My path has been more traditional, and more in line with my ears that gravitate toward harmony and a certain lyrical disposition. So, my checking-out time in the last 15 years has been spent on the music of pianists such as Fred Hersch, Brad Mehldau, Marc Copland, Bill Carrothers and Jon Cowherd. (It was telling to me several months ago when Ottawa jazz writer James Hale commented on the blog after I'd listed [my favourite 2009 jazz listens to date](#): "As usual, we part ways on the pianists.") Furthermore, my most important piano work, I believe, is spent at the keyboard but away from the influences, answering questions such as: What do these notes sound like together? Does this sound good? What comes next? What does this rhythm feel like? What does this sound like in another key and how would it be executed?

I suppose it comes down to this: Frankly, in my limited pursuits as critic and pianist, I just wasn't ready or able to appreciate Iyer -- until now. Sometimes you don't get things until you get things, but at least you do get them and are better off after.

That's what *Historicity* has meant to me personally. Consequently, my thanks go to Vijay Iyer for his music.

(Note: The photo of Vijay Iyer is by Jimmy Katz. The photo of the trio is by Lynne Harty.)

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Gaby Warren

Peter, a very thoughtful analysis. Thanks to the Citizen and your jazz-widow wife for allowing you to spend so many "free"

hours keeping us abreast of new developments in jazz. I have been enriched by following up many of your suggestions and links.

I have noted that your own tastes have broadened during the process of maintaining your blog. You have now reached the point where you should research the recorded legacy of 2 of the most interesting musicians who have recently departed - Andrew Hill and vibist Walt Dickerson.

October 23, 2009

2:05 PM

[James Hale](#)

Hey Peter: This is a really terrific piece of writing (and I'm not just saying that because you name-checked me). Welcome to the Vijay party!

Now, about Cecil Taylor....

October 23, 2009

6:42 AM

[Patrick Jarenwattananon](#)

Why is it that when folks like us are given all this space to write reviews, we inevitably start beginning to write meta-reviews?

October 22, 2009

5:17 PM

Emilio

This is a wonderful review. And you have certainly seduced me in wanting to listen to Iyer.

But what makes it most wonderful is the earnest metanarrative that accompanies the review. I appreciate the accompanying biography; in my mind, it does nothing but increase my understanding of the influences guiding your aesthetic assessment of the work.

October 22, 2009

2:58 PM

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