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DECEMBER 26, 2009, 12:00 PM ET

Jazz Musician Vijay Iyer on "Historicity"

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By Piyali Bhattacharya



Hans Speekenbrink

Jazz performer Vijay Iyer.

When Vijay Iyer enrolled in a PhD program in physics at the University of California, Berkeley, he had no idea that he was about to sign on for a career as a jazz musician instead.

Having taught himself piano and played in a jazz orchestra by the time he was in college, Iyer moved to the Bay Area wanting to get involved with jazz as an extracurricular activity. But with a push in the right

direction from some helpful mentors, Iyer gave up the PhD in 1995 set out to start a recording career. His latest album, "Historicity," was recently released.

The Vijay Iyer Trio, as his group is called, has been gaining popularity over the past several years. "Historicity," Iyer says, builds on many pieces they've played together in the past. One of the most interesting tracks on the album is a jazz version of [the M.I.A. song "Galang."](#) When asked why he chose that piece to rework, Iyer said "It was very much about her as an artist. Her music is very globally conscious. It's playful but dead serious. She and I are the kind of people who have a new kind of connectivity, or mobility. We are able to influence culture. That track was a kind of homage to that."

Iyer says that growing up in Rochester, New York, there weren't many Asian role models to look to on television or in the media, and that it took a leap of faith to pursue a career as an artist, being from a community that expected him to become a scientist. "More than anything, it was a struggle to figure out what my relationship to this music was meant to be," says the Indian-American jazz artist. Iyer says what helped him through it was watching other Asian-American groups in the Bay Area develop their own voices and strengths. "That community of folks helped set me on my path," he says.

Today, settled in New York, Iyer is excited about the release of "Historicity." He says he named the album for all of the questions about personal and musical history that are always occupying his mind, and that his music invites his listeners to ask the same questions of themselves.

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You can see a clip of the Vijay Iyer Trio playing "Galang" below:

Vijay Iyer

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