

Jazzwise

SEPTEMBER 2008
ISSUE 123 £4.10

**'RESPECT
YOURSELF
IN THE FACE
OF IT ALL'**

**VIJAY
IYER**

**STRATEGIES
FOR SURVIVAL**

**TOM
CAWLEY'S
CURIOS
CLOSER TO
THE EDGE**

**INGRID
LAUBROCK
THIEF IN
THE NIGHT**

**BOBO
STENSON
MY BACK
PAGES**

**ALAN
SKIDMORE
A JOB OF
JOURNEY
WORK**

**ZOE
RAHMAN
BENGAL STATE
OF MIND**

**DAVID
SANBORN
ALBUM INTERVIEW**

**PLUS
JD ALLEN
NIKKI ILES
AARON PARKS
HARRY BROWN**

**THE UK'S
BIGGEST
SELLING
JAZZ
MAGAZINE**



9 771368 002074

POST-MODERN MELTDOWN

Pianist **Vijay Iyer** cuts a singular presence on the American jazz scene. With a cerebral, but accessible post-modern style, he has made his presence felt with a run of albums featuring his own cast of collaborators. Best known for his work with altoist Rudresh Mahanthappa and Mike Ladd he won *Jazzwise* album of the year in 2004 with *In What Language?* and since then has continued to craft a singular style that makes him stand out on the sometimes hidebound American scene. **Kevin Le Gendre** talks to Vijay ahead of the release of his latest albums *Tragicomic* and *Door* and his London Jazz Festival appearance later in the year

Either elder statesmen or very successful young Turks in jazz survive by leading just one band these days. In 2008 the bulk of improvising musicians are members of groups other than the one that bears their name. They may also undertake extensive session work in pop, classical or world music.

Obvious examples of this model are David Binney, Ron Blake and Seb Rochford, all very active players who appear in such a wide variety of contexts that they would spring a surprise if they didn't periodically turn up in yet another new venture.

New York-based pianist Vijay Iyer is similarly inclined. His current activities include his own quartet, a duo with alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa known as Raw Materials and Fieldwork, a collective in which Iyer, alto saxophonist Steve Lehman and drummer Tyshawn Sorey are all "composer-members."

There is also a joint project with spoken word artist Mike Ladd and a new group, Tirtha that finds Iyer in the company of guitarist Prasanna and tabla player Nitin Mitta. Last year the pianist also made his debut as a producer, helming *The Chicago Project*, the excellent debut by alto saxophonist Matana Roberts.

A cursory glance at the highlights of some of the recordings of the aforesaid ensembles from the last decade – the quartet's *Panoptic Modes*, *Blood Sutra* and *Re-Imagining*; Fieldwork's *Your Life Flashes* and *Simulated Progress*; Iyer-Ladd's *In What Language?* and *Still Life With Commentator* – shows that Iyer has found creative spice within the variety in his life. One might nonetheless wonder whether this is a demanding existence.

"It is," the 37-year-old replies on the phone from his home in Brooklyn, New York. "I guess the thing is that some of these projects, once

they're up and running, we can go do a show and we might need a little bit of fine tuning and rehearsal but it's not like we have to create from scratch every time.

"I actually like the contrasts. It's nice to go from one thing to another because in a way each of them brings out a different side of who I am. It kind of introduces me to a new part of myself so moving among these different projects is actually a good way to stay 'whole', even though logistically, it is a challenge."

Tragicomic, the latest offering from the quartet, a cohesive ensemble in which Iyer and the aforementioned Mahanthappa are joined by the highly skilled drums and bass unit of Marcus Gilmore and Stephan Crump, presents a compelling summary of the pianist's importance as a purveyor of original thinking as well as a disciplined yet expressive soloist.

A term such as "post-modern" might appear apposite to Iyer given his ability to draw from a wide range of vocabularies within the jazz tradition. Whether his sensibilities pass for avant-garde or mainstream misses the point for Iyer is indirectly squaring the circle between Duke Ellington and Cecil Taylor, reminding us that the harmony expanding flourish of the former is part of the same creative continuum that contains the harmony dissolving whirlpools of the latter. Moreover Iyer's work has drawn extensively on the great metric complexity of non-western genres, namely Indian Carnatic music, a source that has also been instructive to Steve Coleman, the alto saxophonist with whom the pianist has performed extensively in the last decade.

At this relatively early stage of his career, Iyer, born in upstate New York to Tamil parents, has already developed a signature with marks of distinction. Rippling, perambulating arpeggios often yield strong muscular momentum in songs

where time is handled with a fluidity that leans towards that of master drummers like mridangam player Umayalpuram Sivaraman, with whom he studied in Chennai in 2001.

Furthermore Iyer's compositions don't always adhere to theme-variation models. Some pieces are explorations of texture that show an affinity to the collage-like creations of progressive exponents of electronica. His aesthetic prizes the character of sound as well as the narrative of sound.

Fieldwork offers a no less important view of the pianist's work because it sees him retain his expressiveness in an ensemble in which tightly mapped structure is paramount. Most of the songs on *Door*, the ensemble's latest release, have skeletal harmony and something of the ratcheting, rotating motion common to both serialist and Asian classical music. Pieces shift incrementally, nudging around a key rather than taking clearly signposted pathways to new chords.

Concision is at a premium. "Yeah, it does ending up being a dialogue with limits," Iyer concurs. "There's less of an emphasis on soloing. You could say that there's no overplaying yet at the same time we're almost all playing at all times. Most of the time all three of us are making some kind of sound but it's more that the kind of sounds we're making are about thinking contrapuntally and compositionally, not treating it as a solo showcase.

"Part of it is trying to come up with non-soloistic modes of improvisation; there's a history of that in the last 40 years; the post-Coltrane continuum as [Anthony] Braxton calls it.

"There's a whole tradition of making these collective statements that aren't about solos, so we're kind of trying to tap into that history, looking to those precedents certainly without

