



The jazz player

NEW RIFF An Indian master of the original American music form produces jazz album of the year

sunday special

Anirudh Bhattacharyya
 ■ letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW YORK: "No record defined the jazz landscape in 2009 quite like *History*," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote recently as the newspaper selected it as the year's best jazz album.

The album is the latest from the Vijay Iyer Trio led by 38-year-old New York-based Indian-American pianist Vijay Iyer.

It also marks Iyer's emergence as a major figure on the jazz landscape worldwide. *The New York Times* also chose *History* as the best jazz album of 2009.

In an earlier review, a critic for the newspaper gushed, "Presto! Here is the great new jazz piano trio." That trio, besides Iyer, includes Marcus Gilmore on drums and Stephan Crump on bass.

The album also received lavish praise from *The Chicago Tribune*, NPR and virtually every major US media outlet paying attention to the world of jazz. In fact, the annual jazz critics' poll conducted by *The Village Voice*, a leading pop-culture tastemaker published from New York, also picked *History* to top its chart.

In an interview, Vijay Iyer said of the list-topping habit of the album, "I was certainly surprised it ranked so high. You can never foresee this kind of thing. I tried to make an album I liked."

It may actually be an album that is much more mainstream and accessible than most jazz offerings. It has an eclectic mix of covers, for instance.

The album features versions of



Sri Lankan-Brit pop superstar MIA's *Galang*, a Stevie Wonder number and even *Somewhere* from the classic musical *West Side Story*.

"Each one has its own kind of significance for me. I wanted to showcase what the Trio could do," Iyer said.

The *Galang* cover, for example, is an attempt to recreate not only sounds from synthesizers and drum

machines but also MIA's playful, half-rapping vocal style while using real instruments — just piano, bass and drums.

While Iyer's jazz offerings are fairly mainstream, his Indian American roots are evident in his performances with Tirtha, another trio which also includes Indian American musicians — the guitarist Prasanna and tabla player Nitin Mitta.

Iyer, who has just completed a European tour after *History* was released in mid-October 2009, is currently occupied with a bunch of projects. During February and March, he'll be touring with another important Indian-American jazz artist, alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. And in April, he'll be on the road with Tirtha.

Iyer also expects to release an

album with Tirtha this year, while he plans a solo piano album and develops new material for an album with Mahanthappa.

And as an artist whose music is infused with politics, Iyer is also involved in a project with poet Mike Ladd focusing on veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and how they adjust to domestic life when they return to the US.

ALL THAT BUZZ

History is the New York-born Iyer's 13th album since he debuted with *Memorophilia* in 1995.

"I'm able to tour more, specially by having the number one album of the year. More promoters are willing to take a chance on presenting me. Basically, this year will be the real test. The critical embrace by itself is not the end of things"

VIJAY IYER

While the long-term impact of the success of *History* will need to be gauged, Iyer has reaped some benefit from the high-profile reception for the album. But he's working at keeping the success durable.

CRITICS' CHOICE: KUDOS FOR HISTORY

THE VILLAGE VOICE: Jazz Album of the Year (2009)

THE NEW YORK TIMES: #1 Jazz Album of the Year (2009)

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO: #1 Jazz Album of the Year (2009)

LOS ANGELES TIMES: #1 Jazz Album of the Year (2009)

CHICAGO TRIBUNE: #1 Innovative Jazz Release of 2009



■ The trio, besides Vijay Iyer (extreme right), includes Marcus Gilmore (centre) on drums and Stephan Crump on bass. FILE PHOTO

TOP

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