

Vijay Iyer Trio: Colliding With The Jazz Dialectic



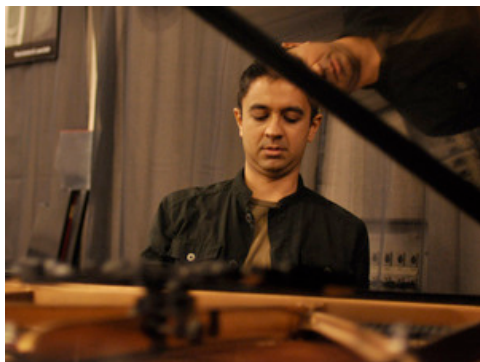
Spotlight: Vijay Iyer Trio Performs Ronnie Foster's 'Mystic Brew'

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Vijay Iyer performs at WBGO.

November 18, 2009 I'm no critic, so I'm in no position to declare anything an "Album of the Year." I would simply direct your attention to [Vijay Iyer's *Historicity*](#), and let you deduce what jazz can still achieve. That is, if you haven't already heard the [Newport concert](#), the [Song of the Day feature](#) or the [review on Fresh Air](#). The relentlessly creative pianist has even been declared the [Toast of the Jazz Internet](#). All Songs Considered? [Yep, been there, too](#). And this is just coverage on NPR Music.

Historicism, as a philosophical premise, occurs when external conditions influence an organic process like improvised music.

"It's a conversation between us and the original creators. Or you could also see it as a collision, in a way," Iyer says, laughing. "We're bringing something that I imagine to be quite different from its origins."

Beyond Standards

Apart from the title song, Iyer's singular contribution here, the trio — bassist Stephan Crump, an Iyer associate for more than a decade, and 24-year-old wunderkind drummer

Marcus Gilmore — take on three "standards" in this [WBGO](#) session.

"Dogon AD" and "Mystic Brew" are both from 1972. The first is a composition by Julius Hemphill, the saxophonist, composer and co-founder of the [World Saxophone Quartet](#).

"I'm really inspired by this whole history of artist collectives," Iyer says. "I guess that ethos is very close to my heart, and it's been very influential to the way I work."

"Mystic Brew" was originally the handiwork of organist Ronnie Foster, though it has made its way into hip-hop lingua franca via Slum Village's "Fantastic" and A Tribe Called Quest's "Electric Relaxation." The latter is Iyer's reference material.

"We take it through some rhythmic transformations, which is why Marcus likes it so much," Iyer says. " 'Triaxation' comes from "Electric Relaxation." It's sort of a composite of those two words."

Connecting Histories

It's the cover — if I may call it that — of pianist [Andrew Hill's](#) "Smokestack" here that makes the case for the Vijay Iyer Trio's brand of historicism. The original drummer on the December 1963 session for Blue Note Records is [Roy Haynes](#). He's the grandfather of drummer Marcus Gilmore. Beyond the familial connection, Hill is the strongest pulse in Iyer's brand of jazz. After hearing Hill's *Point of Departure*, Iyer says it threw him completely.

HEAR MORE FROM THE SESSION

["Dogon AD" \(Julius Hemphill\)](#)

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["Smokestack" \(Andrew Hill\)](#)

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"I thought I had some handle on what was happening," Iyer says. "That was like a whole new level of mystery to me. There's deep beauty to it, but there's also a systemic quality. You feel like there's some kind of hidden order in there."

The connection to Hill became even more personal.

"He gave me a lot of advice, and did a lot for me in terms of my career," Iyer says. "He'd come to my gigs, and then call me the next morning and wake me up to tell me something devastating about what he thought. It messed with my head for a few days. But then I'd think about it and say, 'Yeah, he's right.' "

While there may be some critical debate about the merits of historicism versus post-structuralism versus other fancy words, I'll say this about Vijay Iyer: There may be nothing new under the sun, but certain objects reflect light with more intensity than others. *Historicity's* gamma-ray magnitude penetrates jazz in a way that alters its DNA. That alone makes the case for benevolent radiation.

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