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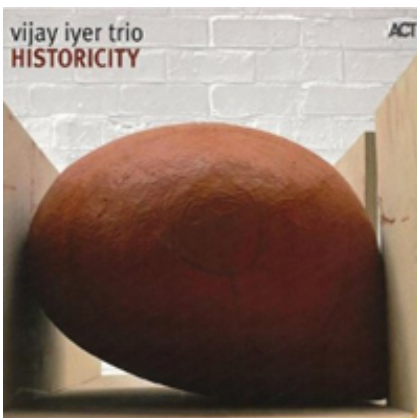


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## Album Review

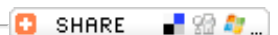


# Vijay Iyer Trio Historicity

[ACT Music + Vision; 2009]

7.8

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The classic Bill Evans Trio, with Scott LaFaro on bass and Paul Motian on drums, is sometimes cited as the best jazz piano trio ever. It's not a point I'd argue-- they were otherworldly. On *Portrait in Jazz* it doesn't even sound like three musicians playing. The record meets your ear like a feeling meets your brain-- you can't grasp it but you know it's there. Few pieces of music made by more than one person suggest quiet and solitude as powerfully.

The Vijay Iyer Trio, with Stephan Crump on bass and Marcus Gilmore on drums, is almost a negative image of the old Bill Evans Trio. The sense of telepathic interplay is there, but it's put toward different ends. If *Portrait in Jazz* is the sound of aloneness, *Historicity* is the sound of crowds, a heaving, seething swirl of cross-talk, phrases meeting in often unexpected combinations. It reflects how far both jazz and our world have come in the last 50-odd years. Today, we're never far from information and chatter, and Iyer uses both his own compositions and those of others to stir conversation with his bandmates.

The most strikingly modern and heavy-hitting track is Iyer's cover of M.I.A.'s "Galang", a startling, compact, and ultimately breathtaking reinvention of the song. It's not some Brad Mehldau look-a-jazz-guy-playing-Radiohead thing either-- this has all the vitality of the original coursing through its thundering block chords, funky backbeat, and fluttering hints of melody on the chorus. He uses the upper octaves of the piano to hammer out a Morse code-like pattern at the beginning of each verse. It stands perfectly well on its own, but it also made me appreciate the original more than I used to, which is about all you can ask of a cover.

The other covers don't require quite as much stretching. Stevie Wonder's "Big Brother" is a natural fit for this trio, while the version of pianist Andrew Hill's "Smoke Stack" reveals an ingredient in Iyer's own sound with its rushing phrases and unceasing motion. *Historicity* is defined in the liners as "a condition of being placed in the stream of history," and this is something jazz musicians have long been conscious of and displayed in the way they quote each other or interpret each other's tunes. Iyer's placement of a Hill interpretation right next to his own "Helix", a cascading, slow-building composition that showcases his pulsing chord-cloud style, historicizes his work in a way by showing its roots. Gilmore's solo is a marvel of textured, nuanced drumming that never gives up its sense of rhythm.

The trio's take on Julius Hemphill's "Dogon A.D." is faithful to the original's sense of hobbled rhythm and high/low melodic interaction, with Iyer's piano dueling against Crump's lurching arco bass. Iyer's own "Segment for Sentiment #2" creates a space for reflection at the album's close, dialing back the ferocity of the trio's interplay for a quiet, almost Evans-ish conversation. It's the kind of respite from daily overstimulation we all need. Iyer and his cohorts have spun the piano trio format into great art here, acknowledging their contemporaries and their musical ancestors. Iyer may be floating in the stream of jazz history now, but if he keeps making records like this, he may one day be a rock that influences the stream's very flow.

— [Joe Tangari](#), November 18, 2009

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