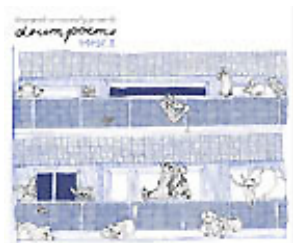


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VIJAY IYER



## WEB EXCLUSIVE

Vijay Iyer is more than a sublimely gifted pianist. He reconfigures sound, fusing physicality and mystic resonance.

Whether trading abstractions with the brilliant and brooding saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, bopping free to the 'prosody' of Mike Ladd or dallying with the sci-fi beats of Anti-pop Consortium's High Priest, Iyer has one trajectory – out.

Chaser recently caught up with the man, on the eve of his appearance at the London Jazz Festival to speak about roots, politics and his latest album 'Historicity', a stirring collection of covers "recast in his own language".

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1. I GATHER YOU USED TO STUDY VIOLIN. WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO THE PIANO AND WAS THERE A PARTICULAR MOMENT OR PIECE OF MUSIC THAT MADE YOU REALISE THIS INSTRUMENT'S TRUE POSSIBILITIES?

"We had a spinet piano in the house because my older sister was taking lessons. So, one good reason to play piano was to annoy my sister. But also, we improvised together a couple of times when I was five or six, and that was a revelation for me. I took the low register, so I could make the whole instrument shake. I still like the low register best."

2. COMING ALSO FROM AN INDIAN CULTURE, I'M LIKE TO KNOW HOW KEEN YOUR PARENTS WERE FOR YOU TO PURSUE A CAREER IN THE ARTS. WAS IT A STRUGGLE OR DID YOUR SEVERAL UNIVERSITY DEGREES DO MUCH TO ASSUAGE THEIR FEARS?

"Certainly, for immigrant parents whose main priorities were survival and stability, a career in the arts wasn't part of the plan. But also, it wasn't obvious to me that I could do it. I didn't really have any clear precedents in American culture; there weren't many visible South Asian Americans around doing anything out of the ordinary. Now our community is a more eclectic bunch – you see more of us in entertainment, art, and politics. But when I was growing up it seemed like a real long shot. So I stayed in academia for a while partly for them, and partly for my own superego."

3. WHAT DO YOU ADMIRE MOST IN PIANO PLAYING, WHETHER IT'S FROM THE STANDPOINT OF LISTENER OR PLAYER: TOUCH, LYRICISM, VIRTUOSITY, SPEED, HARMONY OR MELODY?

"You left rhythm off your list, but that would be my first answer. [Ed: Deliberately! Pre-empting a

good answer.] And then: creativity as an improviser, which is to say, originality of the musical ideas. Cecil Taylor wrote, 'You can't separate the means that a man uses to say something from what he ultimately says. Technique is not separated from its content in a great artist.'

#### 4. HOW OPEN OR RECEPTIVE HAVE YOU FOUND THE AMERICAN JAZZ FRATERNITY TO SOMEONE WITH YOUR BACKGROUND?

"Do you mean musicians or industry people? Musicians respect each other. We are all on the same circuit, collaborate with the same players and get to hear each other often. But I do think that bandleaders tend to hire people similar to themselves. So perhaps I've been hired less frequently by my peers than I have by the elders, who have historically been more open-minded and tolerant of difference.

"As for the industry, critics have been very positive for over a decade. They get free cds, so they just listen to anything they want to, without any of the boundaries or hesitations that come with making a purchase. Concert promoters and labels are more business-minded, more risk-averse, and tend to go with whatever's an easy sell to their customers, so maybe that's been a slower climb."

#### 5. TRADITIONALLY, JAZZ HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MEANS OF SOCIAL COMMENT ON THE TIMES. YOU SEEM TO INVEST YOUR MUSIC WITH A HIGHER PURPOSE AT EVERY AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY – ON 'TRAGICOMIC' FOR INSTANCE. ARE YOU A VERY POLITICAL PERSON OR IS IT MORE A CASE OF NOT BEING ABLE TO BURY YOUR HEAD IN THE SAND IN THE US IN RECENT YEARS?

"There is always that question of whether you can afford not to be political – sometimes circumstances force you to take action in a certain way. I would argue that artists of colour in the West are always political. We're always called on to represent something larger than ourselves – whether it's a cultural/national consciousness or just the experience of difference. In that sense we're always interacting critically with the mainstream.

#### 6. YOUR MUSIC HAS OFTEN BEEN DESCRIBED AS HIGHLY CEREBRAL, INTRICATE AND CONCEPTUAL. AND YOU'VE USED ABSTRACT IDEAS SUCH AS 'CATCHWORD MATHEMATICS' TO EXPRESS THE CONSTANT CHANGES IN RHYTHM AND TEMPO ON THE NEW ALBUM. I CERTAINLY FEEL A CHAOTIC, DISRUPTIVE, MAGNETISING PULSE IN YOUR WORK BUT DO YOU THINK THERE'S A DANGER OF OVER-INTELLECTUALISING YOUR MUSIC?

"Well you know, our music has also been called 'hugely enjoyable and thoroughly accessible', 'immensely exciting', and even 'galvanizing'. I find that people who describe our music as exceptionally cerebral either (1) have never heard us play live, (2) have some issue with me as a person, (3) are frustrated musicians who think they 'understand' music better than most listeners do, or (4) never listened to Coltrane or Monk or Charlie Parker with any kind of scrutiny.

"The real tragedy is the racist myth of jazz involving no intellect to begin with. Certainly there's a composerly orientation to what I do; that is also true of Monk, Andrew Hill, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Steve Coleman, Henry Threadgill etc I don't use mathematics any more than these guys already have. And all of them are incredible players too and their music reaches viscerally right into your body, which is what we try to do as well. But for some reason I am always asked about mathematics – maybe partly because of my academic training from 15 or 20 years ago, and partly because of another myth about Indians being math nerds. Why doesn't anyone ask African American musicians about mathematics or 'over-intellectualising'?"

#### 7. I'M GUESSING THAT YOU WORK IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS NOT ONLY TO DEVELOP YOUR INTERESTS BUT TO SPREAD JAZZ MUSIC TO AS MANY AUDIENCES AS POSSIBLE, SOMETHING THAT ROBERT GLASPER HAS DONE TO GREAT EFFECT WITH THE HIP HOP COMMUNITY, FOR EXAMPLE. THE TWO IDEAS SEEM AT ODDS WITH EACH OTHER.

"Well, don't fall into the trap of de-intellectualising hip hop. Every hip hop artist I've ever worked with is dead serious, works hard, and puts a lot of care and precision into the craft. I don't think there's any contradiction there. Even more than jazz, hip hop is a vast field of music, with a huge range. Yes, it's seen as a vernacular art and it can function as party music, but it can also a challenge on many levels.

"I work in 'multiple contexts' because that's who I am, that's who my friends are and that's the cultural landscape of New York City. I've collaborated with all kinds of artists and I'm influenced by stuff from all over the world. There's no ulterior motive of getting famous or evangelising. The only goals are to be true to myself and to connect with people."

8. WE LIVE IN THE MP3 AGE WHERE PEOPLE ARE BOMBARDED BY MUSIC. IN TURN, THEY CONSIDER MUSIC TO BE A DISPOSABLE COMMODITY. WHATEVER THE GENRE. FINDING TIME TO EXPLORE MUSIC - THE NOTES, THE LYRICS, THE STORY, THE ARTWORK – IS INCREASINGLY RARE. SO AS AN INDEPENDENT JAZZ ARTIST HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT MAKING "MUSIC THAT LASTS" FOR AN AUDIENCE WITH A LIMITED ATTENTION SPAN?

"The best way is through performance. There's no substitute for experiencing music live, and it speaks volumes – far more than liner notes and album art ever will. Short of that, YouTube helps the music get across. It's obviously not the same as being there but the sudden mass availability of audio-visual documents can make the connection more vivid and direct for people."

9. IN A RECENT INTERVIEW ON THE BAD PLUS' BLOG ([HTTP://THEBADPLUS.TYEPAD.COM/DOTHEMATH/2009/09/INTERVIEW-WITH-KEITH-JARRETT.HTML](http://THEBADPLUS.TYEPAD.COM/DOTHEMATH/2009/09/INTERVIEW-WITH-KEITH-JARRETT.HTML)), KEITH JARRETT SPOKE OF TWO TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF PIANO PLAYING THAT FASCINATED ME: THE FIRST WAS THAT "THE LEFT HAND IS THE FINAL FRONTIER OF IMPROVISATION"; THE SECOND WAS THAT, "VOICE LEADING IS MELODY WRITING IN THE CENTRE OF THE HARMONY. IF YOU CAN DO IT, YOU'RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET TO A MOMENT WHERE YOU CAN ACTUALLY FIND MORE THAN ONE THING HAPPENING AND TRACE THOSE THINGS AT THE SAME TIME TO A LOGICAL NEXT PLACE...OR ILLOGICAL PLACE – REALLY IT DOESN'T MATTER SOMETIMES!" DO YOU AGREE WITH THESE COMMENTS? IF YOU COULD ANSWER IN REFERENCE TO YOUR OWN MUSIC THAN THAT MIGHT HELP READERS TO UNDERSTAND!

"Keith sometimes has this problem of believing his opinions to be more original than they are. Want to talk about the left hand? Ever heard of Art Tatum or Willie 'the Lion' Smith or any of the other Harlem Stride legends? Any one of their left-middle fingers could wipe the floor with Keith or any of the rest of us. That's been the standard for almost a century now.

"As for voice leading, Monk had that same awareness, and so did Bach. I'll often have students work through standards or their own compositions as four-voice chorales on the piano. Then they have to really listen, make choices, take risks and create counterpoint. It's funny how it suddenly makes them sound a little more like Monk."

10. LET'S TALK SPECIFICALLY ABOUT THE NEW ALBUM. IT'S A COVERS ALBUM, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT. JAZZ MUSICIANS HAVE LONG STRIVED TO RECONCEPTUALISE THE STANDARDS, OR COVER EACH OTHER OUT OF SHEER REVERENCE. MOST RECENTLY, THE BAD PLUS AND BRAD MEHLDAU HAVE TASTED SUCCESS WITH THIS FORMAT, COVERING EVERYONE FROM RUSH TO APHEX TWIN AND RADIOHEAD. WHY WAS THIS THE RIGHT TIME FOR YOU TO MAKE YOUR 'VERSIONS'?

"As you say, it's not a new idea. Working with other people's music is part of the American performing tradition. For me the best cases involve a creative transformation. Coltrane's album 'My Favorite Things' consists of standards radically recast in his musical language. The same is true of Monk's first album for Riverside (featuring Duke Ellington compositions). In both cases the rhythm, phrasing, harmony and other elements of each song have been completely transformed. You hear the sound of the band and the ideas of its leader in stark contrast to the songs themselves. So those are points of reference.

"Also, though I'm perhaps better known as a composer-performer, I've been playing other people's music for a long time. On Blood Sutra (recorded in 2002) I did a version of 'Hey Joe' and transformed 'Body and Soul' into my tune 'Habeas Corpus'. On 'Reimagining' (recorded 2004) I covered/rearranged/alterd 'Imagine' and 'Revolution'. On 'Tragicomic' (recorded 2007) I did Bud Powell's 'Comin' Up' and the standard 'I'm All Smiles'. In other contexts I've been called on to play music by everyone from Nina Simone to Bruce Springsteen to Meredith Monk.

"As for why I did this project now, it was partly to meet the challenge of a piano trio album. We were invited to record the trio, and I wanted to showcase the group's sound and its possibilities, and I thought it might be easier to hear this in contrast to something previously known."

11. YOU COVER MIA (MORE COMBATIVE THAN THE LADY HERSELF), STEVIE WONDER (MELODY BURIED DEEP WITHIN), JULIUS HEMPHILL, LEONARD BERNSTEIN AND RONNIE FOSTER (LOVING THE 'ELECTRIC CONVERSATION' BRIDGE!). YOU OBVIOUSLY HAVE A VERY WIDE TASTE IN MUSIC. HOW DO YOU FIND NEW MUSIC AND REVISIT THE OLDER TUNES? WAS THIS SELECTION TYPICAL OF WHAT YOU'D BE LISTENING TO ON THE TOUR BUS OR WAS IT MORE A CONSIDERED EFFORT TO LOAD THE NEW ALBUM WITH SEVERAL TOUCH POINTS FOR THE PUBLIC?

"Thanks, I'm glad you like the versions. Again, there was no ulterior motive or marketing strategy in the making of this album. It's just about who I am, what I listen to and who inspires me. It's

almost like making a mixtape for someone – you put care and thought into it. In some cases it's also about what music creates expressive possibility for the trio. A song like 'Somewhere' has so much cultural resonance that it can be pushed and pulled in different directions without losing its essence. That quality supports our creative process."

12. I'VE READ IN PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS THAT YOU LOVE TO CREATE CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES IN YOUR MUSIC; OR, AS YOU HAVE WRITTEN IN THE LINER NOTES, "CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL WORK AND SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY". COULD YOU MAYBE PICK OUT A COUPLE OF YOUR FAVOURITES FROM 'HISTORICITY' AND GIVE US AN INSIGHT INTO THEIR DEVELOPMENT? WHERE DO FIND MARCUS AND STEPHAN'S INPUT TO BE MOST VALUABLE?

"I wrote something in the Guardian newspaper about our version of 'Mystic Brew' and I think that gives one possible answer: [www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/15/fibonacci-golden-ratio](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/oct/15/fibonacci-golden-ratio)

"On the other hand, with 'Dogon AD', it was just challenging to do as a piano trio, since it was never meant for that combination – it was originally scored for two horns, cello, and drums. Our version is as faithful as possible given the altered format, and then we stretched it in our own way for the improvised part. We tried to push the intensity to do justice to the original's searing quality.

"Marcus, Stephan and I have been working together for long enough that the group has a consistent sound and a close rapport no matter what we play. So we are able to adapt a new composition quickly and without too much fuss. Then we can focus on sound, texture, feel, and energy – the things you can't really write down."

13. HOW HAVE YOU FOUND THE USE OF ABLETON IN YOUR DEVELOPMENT AS A PRODUCER AND LEADER, AND DO YOU FEEL THAT MOVING AWAY FROM A PURELY ACOUSTIC SETTING PRECLUDES YOU FROM REALLY MASTERING YOUR INSTRUMENT, AS KEITH JARRETT ARGUED WHEN RECALLING HERBIE HANCOCK'S ELECTRIC PERIOD?

"Once again, Keith and his personal problems! Do you actually think an interest in electronics prevented Herbie Hancock (or Chick Corea, or Gonzalo Rubalcaba, or Kenny Kirkland, or Craig Taborn) from mastering the piano?

"Ableton Live has been pivotal for me. It's really flexible and well suited for musicians. It's really easy to use in performance, easy to improvise with and easy to compose with. I created all the tracks for 'Still Life with Commentator' in Live and I've used it for film and theatre, for my orchestra piece, and most recently for my remix for Talvin Singh. I also use it to create loops for practising some of my own music. So at this point it's become an indispensable tool in the arsenal."

14. YOU'VE WORKED WITH SOME HIGHLY ORIGINAL ARTISTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT: RUDRESH MAHANTHAPPA, MIKE LADD, ROSCOE MITCHELL, HIGH PRIEST, MATANA ROBERTS, BURNT SUGAR... DO YOU FIND THESE COLLABORATIONS JUST HAPPENING THROUGH COSMIC FORTUNE – GOOD MUSIC BRINGING LIKE MINDS TOGETHER – OR HAVE YOU BEEN VERY PROACTIVE IN SEEKING OUT INDIVIDUALS AND STARTING NEW PROJECTS?

"I suppose I've just been lucky to be around a lot of interesting artists. Sometimes I've pursued them and other times they've pursued me, and sometimes it's been a joint venture. No one can be totally passive – you have to put yourself out there if you want to participate in culture. But at some level it's about who you are and what you do. If you do good work, and bring it out into the world, then good things can come of it. You'll find like-minded individuals and find opportunities to build."

15. APART FROM THE HUGE NUMBER OF GIGS THAT YOU HAVE IN THE PIPELINE, WHAT'S NEXT FOR 2010? ANOTHER COLLABORATION WITH MIKE LADD, I HOPE. FURTHER EXPERIMENTS WITH ELECTRONICS, PERHAPS? YOU'RE ALSO A MEMBER OF THE FACULTY AT NYU; WILL WE BE SEEING YOU DEVOTE MORE OF YOUR TIME TO MENTORING? THAT GENERATIONAL EDUCATION THAT STUDENTS WERE ABLE TO GET AT UNIVERSITY FROM THE LIKES OF MAX ROACH AND DONALD BYRD, OR IN ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS THE AACM, IS NOW A RARITY AND MORE NECESSARY THAN EVER, DON'T YOU THINK?

"2010 sees a lot of continuity with 2009. I'm touring Europe a lot with the trio ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRnOAUPi18l](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRnOAUPi18l)). Also, Mike Ladd and I are beginning a new project, this one about the young American veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We're doing

some preliminary shows in February, but it's looking to be a year-long development if we want to do the project right.

I also started working with High Priest as you mention ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJPNtEWqjE0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJPNtEWqjE0)) so we're trying to build that. And I'm continuing the ongoing collaborations: Fieldwork (trio with Tyshawn Sorey and Steve Lehman – [www.youtube.com/watch?v=snouzsTbF7M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snouzsTbF7M)), Raw Materials (duo with Rudresh – [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk8yKxHK-NM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xk8yKxHK-NM)) and Tirtha (trio of myself and two Indian musicians: Prasanna on electric guitar and Nitin Mitta on tabla – [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyNvJFIXbsU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyNvJFIXbsU)). Tirtha's debut album should be released in the next year or so. I've also just done a remix for Talvin Singh, and I am working on sound design for an installation at an abandoned prison in Philadelphia, in collaboration with filmmaker Bill Morrison.

"I do find teaching rewarding. I've been doing it for years. I find that it's harder for young musicians to have that intense mentoring contact with the older musicians – the days of Blakey and Betty Carter have passed. I'm not very old but I've been worked directly with the very innovators that most students today have no access to. I also find it important to have the persona of an actual artist on faculty at these music schools, which are otherwise so often pitched at a journeyman level."

#### 16. WHO ARE THE GAME-CHANGERS THAT CHASER'S READERS SHOULD BE LOOKING OUT FOR IN 2010: MUSICIANS, PRODUCERS, ARTISTS AND THINKERS...

"I don't know what the future holds but I'm sure it will involve some of my brilliant friends: Tyshawn Sorey, Craig Taborn, this hip hop group Das Racist, Mendi + Keith Obadike, Steve Lehman, Okkyung Lee and Anti-pop Consortium. Also check out Robin Kelley's new Monk biography and anything written or edited by Greg Tate, Marisa Jahn, George E Lewis, Kavita Rajagopalan and Suketu Mehta. And, as you can see from the cover of *Historicity*, I'm a fan of the artist Anish Kapoor!"

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'*Historicity*' is out now on ACT Music & Vision.

Vijay Iyer will be performing at the Purcell Room, Southbank centre on Sunday 15 November – featuring pianist and bassist Lars Danielsson. Click on the link below to book tickets and make sure you arrive by 6pm to hear him in conversation with Kevin Le Gendre in the Front Room. It's a free session and and the perfect warm up to the gig.

Words: Amar Patel  
Pictures: (c) Jimmy Katz; (c) kg656

LINKS

[www.londonjazzfestival.org.uk/events/2009-11-15/vijay-iyer-leszek-mozdzer](http://www.londonjazzfestival.org.uk/events/2009-11-15/vijay-iyer-leszek-mozdzer)  
[www.vijay-iyer.com/media](http://www.vijay-iyer.com/media)  
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