

## 2009: The Year Of Living Improvisationally

by [Josh Jackson](#)



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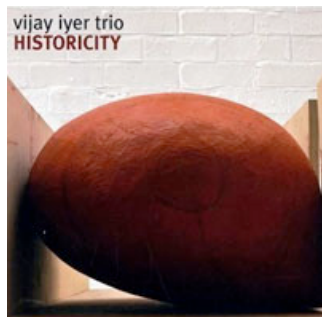
December 11, 2009 from [WBGO](#) - This was a good year for discovering jazz. [WBGO](#) celebrated its 30th anniversary. My show, [The Checkout](#), launched in April. [A Blog Supreme](#) followed suit. We rocked coverage of the [55th Newport Jazz Festival](#). Our series, [Live at the Village Vanguard](#), is hitting its stride as a multimedia experience from New York's greatest listening space — now online. More and more, at least in public media, it's never been easier to seek out new experiences in jazz.

With many hundreds of new recordings each year, jazz maintains a lot of biodiversity in its

tiny ecosystem. Chances are, it's got something for everyone, but finding the right fit is like searching for an ant in the jungle; it's never an easy quest, but when it happens, you'll likely find an entire colony. Here are the 10 finest jazz records of 2009.

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### 2009: THE YEAR OF LIVING IMPROVISATIONALLY



#### 1. Vijay Iyer

*Album:* [Historicity](#)

*Song:* [Big Brother](#)

How can such a well-worn format (piano, bass and drums) sound like a sudden shakedown? For starters, [Vijay Iyer](#)'s trio includes a promising young innovator dispersing prismatic rhythms, a bassist who thrives on intensity and a leader who cuts into songs with an incisor before removing their flesh. The composite of three instruments -- moving in synchrony, bumping against the isotopes of jazz past and reorganizing the jazz on a molecular level -- is electrostatic. *Historicity* arrived at a time when the piano trio needed a redressing. Iyer did it.

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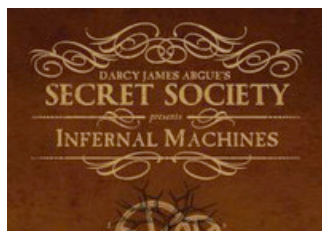
#### 2. Miguel Zenon

*Album:* [Esta Plena](#)

*Song:* [Villa Palmeras](#)

There's an El Niño reshaping the climate in modern jazz, and it's oscillating from the tropics. Puerto Rican-born saxophonist [Miguel Zenon](#) is among the most compelling voices in music, a fact for which he has received numerous accolades (most notably the MacArthur Genius Grant). Here, Zenon articulates a combination of folkloric plena rhythms and the obsessive momentum of his working jazz quartet. The result is a stunning algebra of highly stylized Latin music with a jazz tinge, plus x.

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#### 3. Darcy James Argue Secret Society

*Album:* [Infernal Machines](#)

*Song:* [Phobos](#)

Add [Darcy James Argue](#) to the short list of composers beating up the jazz big-band format, especially one that has been warped by tradition and trapped in the amber of the Swing Era. Argue makes his Secret Society debut here, and he introduces a band that pulses like a steam locomotive. He doesn't punk the idea of jazz orchestra, but rather expands its source



code to include elements of classical minimalism, anthemic rock and Ellingtonia. A cast of deadly improvisers makes this jazz work in every way. It'd be a shame to keep this kind of originality a secret.

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#### 4. JD Allen Trio

*Album:* Shine!

*Song:* Sonhouse

In the crowded field of tenor saxophonists in jazz, thirtysomething [JD Allen](#) has been, remarkably, hiding in plain sight. On *Shine*, his second straight trio recording, Allen and company hit their stride. They make sax/bass/drum combinations resonate. Each composition says what needs to be said, and finishes without proselytizing. Rudy Royston and Gregg August play an urban-sophisticate style of drum and bass, leaving plenty of room for Allen to swoop, slash and ring an emphatic affirmative.

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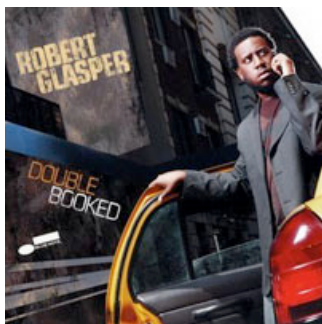
#### 5. Steve Lehman Octet

*Album:* Travail, Transformation and Flow

*Song:* No Neighborhood Rough Enough

You don't need to be a doctoral candidate in music composition and theory to understand the use of spectral harmony and how it's fundamental to this recording. [Steve Lehman](#) does all the hard work for you. The timbral characteristics of *Travail, Transformation, and Flow* address the 1960s Blue Note recordings of Jackie McLean and Grachan Moncur with fascinating new results. Lehman's octet combines notes in a way that sounds computer-generated at times, yet there's no such electronic chicanery. The sheer density of these compositions could sink a casual listener, but the heat and pressure created by drummer [Tyshawn Sorey](#) keeps them buoyant.

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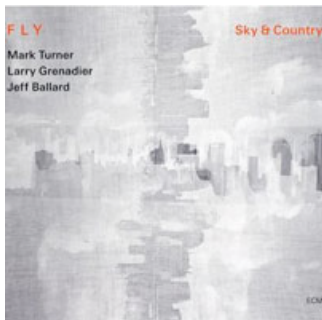
#### 6. Robert Glasper

*Album:* Double Booked

*Song:* Downtime

Rare is the pianist who can harness all of those notes and give voice to them in new and meaningful ways, but [Robert Glasper](#)'s sound is so identifiable that he's becoming a pronoun and an adjective. *Double Booked* is the record Glasper wanted to make in his image. It's a twofor: the work of an acoustic jazz trio and a showcase for his electric hip-hop and soul-jazz hybrid, The Robert Glasper Experiment. Neither of these units is the loss leader for the other. Glasper's singular intent makes the experience of listening to each "side" a win-win proposition.

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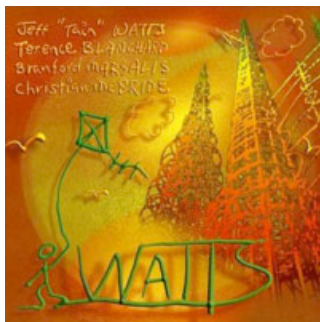
#### 7. Fly *Artist:* Grenadier/Turner/Ballard

*Album:* Sky and Country

*Song:* Elena Berenjena

Fly doesn't belong to any one of its constituent parts. Saxophonist [Mark Turner](#), bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jeff Ballard are an equally weighted ensemble that delights in the narrative experience. The collective work ethic running through Fly's second recording tackles a variety of musical puzzles in an egalitarian way: Pastoral bass lines share time with Turner's shifting forms and recapitulations, locked tight with an occasional backbeat. *Sky & Country* is highly crafted, intelligent music.

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## 8. Jeff "Tain" Watts *Artist:* Jeff "Tain" Watts

*Album:* Watts

*Song:* Return of the Jitney Man

If you want to add instant heat to any proceeding, [Jeff "Tain" Watts](#) is your judge, jury and executioner. The rhythmic juggernaut released *Watts* in early 2009, and it sounds like an anti-record. Instead of a tightly controlled studio product, pored over endlessly for the sake of perfection, Watts brings a cadre of ringers to play his original compositions. [Branford Marsalis](#), [Terence Blanchard](#) and [Christian McBride](#) sound as if they're having a blast in the chambers of Tain, even when they burn. The result is an off-the-cuff/on-the-record session of a piano-less quartet going for broke.

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## 9. Gretchen Parlato

*Album:* In a Dream

*Song:* I Can't Help It

[Gretchen Parlato](#), the only vocalist to attend the Thelonious Monk Institute for Jazz Performance, connects with her fellow graduates, all current or former members of trumpeter Terence Blanchard's working band. Intimacy and shared sense of purpose yields stellar results on *In a Dream*, especially the duets with guitarist [Lionel Loueke](#). Parlato has a commanding vocal control and rhythmic dexterity that's dynamic, even when she's breathy and gossamer. Handclaps, tub splashes and intros from a 2-year-old Parlato all blur the life and the music.

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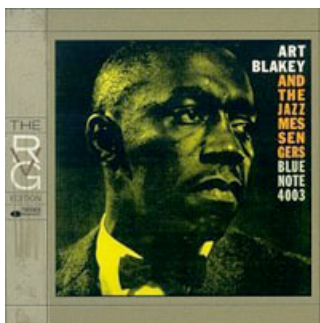
## 10. Stefon Harris and Blackout

*Album:* Urbanus

*Song:* For You

Raise your hand if you thought you'd hear the vocoder in jazz again. Or [George Gershwin's](#) American folk opera set to a go-go rhythm. How about band members who have alter egos that sound like Saturday-morning cartoon characters -- Dark-Maninov, Razzle Dazzle, Gogopolo, B Dub and Tank? *Blackout* is a band of serious practitioners of the benevolent dark arts, and it's reintroducing urban culture into the jazz tradition. Jazz needs more signifiers of streetwise indirection like this.

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## Reissue: Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Newport Recordings on Wolfgang's Vault

*Song:* A Night in Tunisia

Marketing hype being what it is, the year 1959 has been overly fetishized as a banner year for jazz. To be sure, jazz as a cultural currency was waning. Wolfgang's Vault recently released 27 sets of music from the 1959 Newport Jazz Festival, and these performances open a window to reappraising that time. [Art Blakey](#) had not yet recorded his famous version of "A Night in Tunisia." [Wayne Shorter](#) wasn't even in the band. (He was, however, in [Maynard Ferguson's](#) group at Newport that year.) A cocksure [Lee Morgan](#), just shy of 21, is in this band. The saxophonist, Hank Mobley, had also returned to the Jazz Messengers. Beautifully recorded, this Blakey beat is essential listening.

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**Victor Mlaa (VicMlaa)** wrote:

Love the Blakey & JM reissue and 2009 was an excellent year for Improv. Check out this one from earlier this year.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGIOOaphOlg&feature=related>

This was completely improvised live from Furman University.  
vm

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