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Music

Vijay Iyer Tops the Fourth Annual Village Voice Jazz Poll

Historicity and records from other fresh faces take our 2009 jazz poll

By Francis Davis

Tuesday, December 29th 2009 at 1:00pm

The last ballot has been cut-and-pasted, and I couldn't be happier with the results of the fourth annual *Village Voice* Jazz Critics' Poll. Oh, sure I could—but with a record 99 critics voting, what would *Nate Silver* have said the odds were of my top four actually finishing No. 1 through 4 for Album of the Year?

Nothing's better than a close race where you're cheering for both sides, and *Vijay Iyer's Historicity*—a classic piano-trio album if your definition extends, as mine does, to such maverick examples as *Herbie Nichols's Blue Note* records, *Paul Bley's Footloose!*, *Don Pullen's New Beginnings*, and *Misha Mengelberg's Who's Bridge*, alongside accepted-as-canonical Monk, *Bud Powell*, and *Bill Evans*—built its narrow lead over alto saxophonist and flutist *Henry Threadgill's This Brings Us To, Volume 1* only late in the game. Third went to tenor saxophonist *Joe Lovano*, the only musician to place in the Top 10 every year since this poll's inception, for *Folk Art*. But the real news might be *Darcy James Argue*, a 34-year-old Brooklynite by way of *Vancouver*, whose astonishing *Infernal Machines*, with the big band he calls his Secret Society, finished fourth overall in addition to its landslide victory as the year's best debut, despite unusually formidable competition in that category.

Allen Toussaint's The Bright Mississippi, another of my choices, finished seventh, and three others on my ballot—*Bill Frisell's Disfarmer*, *Bill Dixon's Tapestries for Small Orchestra*, and *Dave Douglas's Spirit Moves*—ranked in the top 15. Every year, as I look not just to expand the voter base but democratize it by recruiting more women, African-Americans, and younger voters with the necessary credentials, my wife likes to joke that what I'm really aiming for is a consensus Top 10 identical to mine. This year is probably the closest I'll ever come to reaching that subconscious goal, even if everybody else said humbug to *Carla Bley's* delightful *Carla's Christmas Carols*, mentioned on my ballot and no other. Yet I don't mind telling you that I approached conducting this year's poll with an apprehension bordering on dread.

Part of it may have been the inevitable letdown from my elation over *Obama's* election in '08 (he inherited not just two wars but three—and the presence of a black man in the *White House* has only escalated the Culture Wars), coupled with simple decade fatigue (the *uh-oh's* witnessed a stolen presidential election, the worst domestic terrorist attack in



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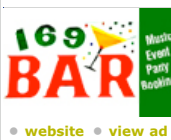
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history, the submergence of an entire city, the collapse of the free market, and the possible demise of the publishing and recording industries). But the main source of my blues was a concern specific to this poll. Two years ago, in this space, I worried aloud about major labels, with their vast promotional reach, dominating the standings. Those were the days, huh? Those majors that haven't dispensed with jazz altogether to help stem the tide of red ink have severely trimmed their mailing lists, and many independents are becoming just as stingy with review copies.

Granted, the only thing more annoying than critics going on about getting more free CDs than they have time to listen to is the same freeloaders bellyaching about not getting enough. And it's tough to fault labels for their sudden parsimony, because what sense does it make for them to send out a few hundred promos of an album expected to sell a couple thousand, tops? But I worried that this new PR austerity might tilt this year's standings, and in at least one case, I bet it did. Critics can be pushovers for an ambitious concept the same as everybody else, which is why I have to believe that *Dedicated to You*, Kurt Elling's salute to Coltrane and Johnny Hartman, would have waltzed to victory as Best Vocal if Concord had

bothered to service more than a handful of us. Instead, it finished second to a genuine sleeper, relative newcomer Gretchen Parlato's *In a Dream*. (I knew I wouldn't be voting for either. My choice was *Normal as Blueberry Pie*, Nellie McKay's irresistibly kooky tribute to Doris Day. Love the way arranger Paul Holderbaum transforms "Wonderful Guy" into Kurt Weill and then a modal romp. And love how McKay's phrasing evokes the late Susannah McCorkle on the opener, "The Very Thought of You," immediately establishing McCorkle as a link. Then, I also love Doris Day.)

Soon enough, the only new music we'll hear will consist of MP3 files sent by our Facebook friends, and the notion of consensus will seem quaint. In the meantime, what's not to like about a poll honoring both an upstart like Darcy James Argue and Best Reissue victor Louis Armstrong (for Mosaic's completist box of his '30s and '40s Deccas)? In contrast to the initial poll four years ago—wherein no artist under 50 cracked the Top 10—this year's encouraging tally boasts four still in their thirties (Iyer, Argue, and alto saxophonists Steve Lehman and Miguel Zenón, the last of whom also romped to victory in Best Latin) and another just over 40 (Argue's fellow big-band leader and Bob Brookmeyer disciple John Hollenbeck). Paced by Argue, two other free-thinking rookies also did extremely well, with alto saxophonist Darius Jones finishing 17th and bassist Linda Oh just missing the Top 20.

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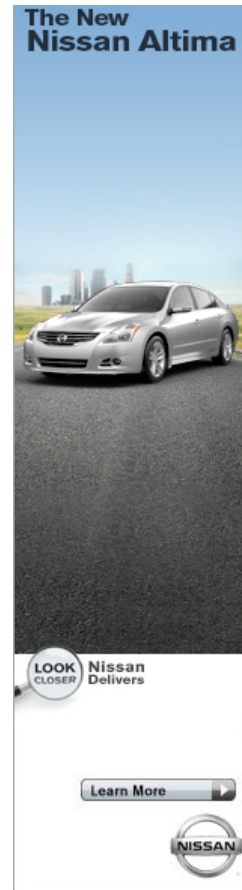
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