

# FULLY ALTERED media



In the liner notes to his new album, Vijay Iyer explains the word “historicity” as the simple fact of being placed in the stream of history – along with everything it may imply.

The idea of today’s creations drawing from older sources compelled Iyer to title his new trio CD *Historicity*. In one sense, the idea is quite literal, as more than half of the album consists of interpretations of other composer’s material.

It may seem strange that Iyer, one of the most forward-thinking composers and musicians in modern jazz, should keep one eye so resolutely in the rear view mirror here. But one listen to his trio’s performances of these tunes – by composers ranging from Leonard Bernstein to Andrew Hill to Stevie Wonder to M.I.A. – reveals a decidedly personal reimagining of each one.

“This project is very current for me,” Iyer says, “but in terms of content it’s also meditating on history a little bit. This is music that I’ve admired and cherished for a long time, but filtered through our language.”

Twice voted both #1 Rising Star Jazz Artist and Rising Star Composer in Downbeat Magazine’s International Critics’ Poll, Iyer has been a compelling voice in modern jazz for more than a decade.

Holding a B.S. in Mathematics and Physics from Yale and a Masters in Physics and an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Technology and the Arts from UC Berkeley, Iyer is equally steeped in the science as well as the art of music. He’s worked with a wide range of contemporary artists, including Steve Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell, Amiri Baraka, Wadada Leo Smith, Oliver Lake, Imani Uzuri, Dafnis Prieto, Karsh Kale, and John Zorn, composed pieces for classical ensembles including the string quartet Ethel and Imani Winds, and scored film, dance and theater works.

Beyond the explicit revisiting of past influences, *Historicity* is located at the crossroads of myriad separate histories as they converge at a single point in time - histories that are personal, musical, cultural, conceptual, and for the trio, deeply collaborative.

Bassist Stephan Crump has played steadily with Iyer for a decade, anchoring the pianist’s last four quartet records. Drummer Marcus Gilmore completed the band on the most recent pair of those CDs, having joined the quartet in 2003 as a 16-year-old prodigy.

This CD, then, represents several years of mutual development, unleashed in the freer trio format. But it’s informed as well by Iyer’s other projects and influences: his longtime collaboration with saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, the fourth man on each of those quartet albums; his politically-charged concept albums with poet-performer Mike Ladd; his role in the experimental collective Fieldwork.

It also represents the influence of Iyer's work outside of the jazz realm have influenced his own music. His alliances with the likes of Dead Prez, Karsh Kale, Talvin Singh, DJ Spooky and the electro-soul-rock big band Burnt Sugar come to bear on the trio's versions of British hip-hop artist M.I.A.'s "Galang" and Ronnie Foster's "Mystic Brew" – the latter itself an example of enfolded histories, famously sampled in A Tribe Called Quest's "Electric Relaxation."

In his choice of material for the record, Iyer points to a "disruptive" or "insurgent" quality that these songs possess and that he sought to amplify in his arrangements.

"It's music that's about more than music," he says. "It seems to erupt through the medium, crack it open. It doesn't feel like you're just listening to a recording - it feels like something is coming alive and reaching out and grabbing you. That vividness, that searing power – that's what I admire and what I strive for."

Iyer counted the late pianist Andrew Hill as a friend and mentor, and cites Hill's 1963 album *Smokestack* as one of his favorites. The trio's take on the title tune captures Iyer's wonder at Hill's writing, spelunking into the cavernous composition to discover consistently surprising wonders. Much the same can be said of altoist Julius Hemphill's "Dogon A.D.", which has not been reduced in stripping away the original's horns and cello; Hemphill's sense of mystery and fractured down-home swagger survive intact.

Witness how the anguish and outrage of Wonder's "Big Brother," lyrically a lament about politicians ignoring their impoverished constituents, is captured by Iyer's emphatic rumble paired with Crump's groaning arco bass. Or the way that the trio's percussive take brings out the urgency and tension in M.I.A.'s insistently danceable "Galang."

The one venture into standard repertoire is a radical examination of "Somewhere" from *West Side Story*, which Iyer wryly describes as "a problematic tale of immigrants in New York City." The original's seeking plaint is shaken up, the question mark floating free over not only the "place," but exactly which "us" the song is referencing.

It's the sort of question that Iyer, as a first-generation Indian-American, asks often in his music. Although there is nothing that screams out as explicitly "Indian" about *Historicity*, Iyer says that his background comes into play throughout.

"To me, it's everywhere," he says. "It doesn't always necessarily announce itself, but it's part of who I am, and that speaks through the music in an organic way."

Of the four Iyer originals on *Historicity*, two (the title track and "Helix") are brand-new time-bending head-twisters, while the two others revisit older pieces from the composer's discography. "Segment for Sentiment" originally appeared on his 1995 debut, *Memorophilia*, and hasn't been much revived since; "Trident," on the other hand, has been a constant in Iyer's repertoire since he recorded it for 1998's *Architextures*.

"Trident has this inner resonance for me," Iyer says. "It feels like home when we play that song, yet at the same time it keeps surprising us. There wasn't any greater agenda than trying to capture a snapshot of what it is today. I might keep doing that for the next ten or twenty years."

That constant transformative relationship between past and present is, in essence, what *Historicity* is all about. “It’s just a condition of being alive,” Iyer says. “We’re always shaped by history, even as we reach into the future.”

[www.vijay-iyer.com](http://www.vijay-iyer.com)

**For more information on Vijay Iyer,  
please contact Matt Merewitz at Fully Altered Media:  
(347) 384-2839 or [matt@fullyaltered.com](mailto:matt@fullyaltered.com)**

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