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66<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL CRITICS POLL

**JAZZ ARTIST  
JAZZ GROUP**

By Jon Garelick | Photo by Jimmy & Dena Katz

# VIJAY IYER

## COMMUNITIES OF SOUND

**THERE'S SOMETHING PARTICULARLY APT ABOUT VIJAY IYER'S ACADEMIC TITLES AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE'S BEEN TEACHING SINCE 2014:** Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts and Graduate Advisor in Creative Practice and Critical Inquiry. Yes, the endowed chair is nice, but “professor of the arts” and “advisor in creative practice” seem to sum up the man. It’s fitting that the terminology here is not “jazz studies” or “theory and practice,” but rather, “the arts” and “critical inquiry.”

For Iyer—winner of the 2018 DownBeat Critics Poll categories Jazz Artist of the Year and Jazz Group (for his namesake sextet)—jazz doesn’t exist in isolation. Which is another reason why the appointment at Harvard, with its core liberal arts program, suits the 46-year-old pianist’s particular take on jazz, on music, on the arts and on the world. A child of immigrants, and the winner of multiple accolades—including a handful of previous DownBeat Critics Poll wins with his longstanding trio (with bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore) and a 2013 MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship—Iyer began his academic career as a scientist. He was a physics and math major as an undergraduate at Yale, and his Ph.D. thesis at the University of California, Berkeley, was titled, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics.” So his pedagogical inclination is toward diversity, and his expansive attitude toward jazz is second nature.





# 'MY STUDENTS ARE UP FOR THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING SOMETHING THAT HAS NO REAL PRECEDENT.'

"This isn't a school of music," Iyer says, sitting in his basement office in the Harvard Music Building. "There's no performance program. There are courses that involve performance. But I guess it has more in common with how I learned, which was kind of in dialogue with the larger world. ... I don't want to say that nothing good happens in conservatories, but it's a bit removed from the context in which music exists. Music doesn't exist for the conservatory. It exists for people. And so, if you don't have contact with the larger world, then you lose track of what you're doing."

In his courses, Iyer assigns a broad range of reading and writing—"everything from Robin Kelley's biography of [Thelonious] Monk to George Lewis' book about the AACM, to Benjamin Looker's book on the Black Artists' Group, Horace Tapscott's autobiography, and Angela Davis' book on blues women and black feminism." And, depending on where the students' projects take them, Iyer might assign pieces by French post-structural theorists or selections from black studies scholarship.

Students have to audition for Iyer's ensemble workshops, so there is a basic skill level that's required. But, he says, "It's a mixed bag." A good proportion "are young white kids from affluent backgrounds who maybe had a good high school jazz ensemble, but maybe they've never

read a black author or maybe they've never had a black teacher." On the other hand, "I also have a lot of students of color in my classes, mostly children of immigrants, including children of African immigrants. So, they may self-identify as black, but do not have a lot of contact with older African-American culture. So, it's sort of new for a lot of them."

That diversity of backgrounds also shapes the music-making itself. Looking back at his ensemble workshop students of the previous semester, Iyer says, "Some of them were singer-songwriters. Some of them were beat-makers. Some of them situate themselves as jazz musicians. Some of them had classical training. The main thing was that they were all serious and they all had potential collaborative abilities. So, just to get them intensely making work together—and we didn't have to call it anything until it happened, and then we could listen to it and figure out what it was. These students are up for a challenge like that, of building something that has no real precedent. It was really exciting to hear what they came up with."

Along the way, Iyer says, "I often had to disabuse them of a lot of things, a lot of assumptions about what jazz is, and whether it is what they think it is."

And that, according to Iyer, is how real jazz gets made. His students, he explains, "have to

learn how to hear in different ways and learn how to accommodate other perspectives. To me, that's the real tradition ... people kind of coming together from different corners and building something that didn't exist yet. That's how I see the birth of what's called bebop. That's how I see the Harlem Renaissance. That's how I see the creative music movement of the '60s and '70s."

It's not as though all of Iyer's methods would be out of place in a conservatory. "There's a lot of rigor involved," he says, "and rigorous training. There's a lot of rigor involved in just the doing of the music—like, how do you listen to each other? How do you synchronize? We talk about form. We talk about orchestration and texture and kind of give a bit more detail and nuance to what they're doing; so it's not just a beat, even when some of them are making beats on their laptop."

There's also jazz history, though not necessarily a typical historical survey. "Everything I know, and all my wisdom as an artist, comes from being in that world and that space and from all those artists, from Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Muhal Richard Abrams, Alice Coltrane, Geri Allen, to name just a handful," Iyer says. But the musical examples might also extend from the jazz canon to Bach and Berg,

or maybe some of the hip-hop and techno artists who have inspired Iyer, like Detroit producer and DJ Robert Hood, the inspiration for the song “Hood,” from the 2015 Iyer trio disc, *Break Stuff* (ECM).

“Basically,” Iyer says, “this is not a ‘great man’ theory of jazz. It’s more of a series of communities, of collective histories. It’s histories of collective action. And it’s also not about styles. It’s about people, which is an important distinction to me.”

The idea of jazz being fostered by diverse communities is central to how Iyer understands the musician’s place in the world.

“What’s been great is that these young artists have been able to remain grounded in a world of ideas and in contact with a community that isn’t just made of other musicians, so then they can actually respond to what’s happening in the world, and they can make the work a pointed response.”

Those responses have been varied. “Last fall, my students put on a concert that was a benefit for Puerto Rico, and they put on another benefit concert for the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. That was just partly because that was what was in the air at that time, and obviously still is. That kind of work has a very clear context in the campus community or in the city. So, they’re learning how to be artists in the world.” Iyer’s own direct responses have included his 2013 collaboration with poet and DJ/producer Mike Ladd, *Holding It Down: The Veterans’ Dreams Project* (Pi Recordings), part of a trilogy addressing the post-9/11 context of American life. That aesthetic also applies to the award-winning sextet’s 2017 release *Far From Over* (ECM), whose title refers to the never-ending struggle for justice and equal rights. Iyer has described “a resistance in this music, an insistence on dignity and compassion, a refusal to be silenced.”

*Far From Over*, Iyer’s third release for ECM, is stunning not just for the individual virtuosity of the players, but for its formal daring—which is, in its way, a metaphorical embodiment of the collective vulnerability that Iyer refers to when talking about the music. That’s true for the electric funk grooves of tunes like “Nope” and “End Of The Tunnel,” as well as the expanding form of album closer “Threnody” or the brooding ballad “For Amiri Baraka,” for the late poet.

Though the shifting form of a piece like “Threnody” is enthralling, Iyer downplays its complexity. “The forms aren’t that hard, actually, in the long run,” he says. “I have these forms that are four bars long, but those four bars might be stacked with information. There might be layers of rhythms that it would take you a few days to learn, even if it’s four measures long. So, it’s not necessarily something you can read down, either. But then you kind of get it in your body and then figure out how

to move with it, and then it’s just about creating together with that as a sort of framework.”

The genesis of the sextet dates back to 2011, when Iyer was invited to New York’s River to River Festival and was encouraged to broaden his palette beyond the trio. For that first gig, Rudresh Mahanthappa, from Iyer’s quartet, was on alto, with Graham Haynes on cornet and flugelhorn and Mark Shim on tenor saxophone, as well as Crump and Gilmore. Eventually, Mahanthappa was overtaken with commitments to his own projects, so Iyer turned to longtime collaborator Steve Lehman for the alto chair. For the April 2017 recording

session, another Iyer regular, Tyshawn Sorey, came in on drums. (Iyer has maintained long relationships with both Sorey and Gilmore, having collaborated with the former for 18 years and the latter for 16 years.)

Though the sextet is by necessity more tightly arranged than the trio, Iyer says it offered yet another chance for him to work with musicians “who could bring a creative sensitivity to the music and could deal with intricate forms and kind of push beyond them.”

And, of course, it was—unlike some of his more unclassifiable ensemble arrangements for the string quartet-centered *Mutations* (ECM),

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Iyer (left) sees the sextet format as “iconic” within the jazz genre.

his work with Ladd, or even his otherworldly duo collaborations with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith—a classic jazz format.

“If you think about the history of that format—*Kind Of Blue*, Andrew Hill’s *Point Of Departure* [1964], or even Herbie Hancock’s *Sextant* [1973]—there’s no shortage of sextet records. It’s kind of an iconic form.”

For his own sextet, Iyer says, “It’s a matter of basically having these three pretty disparate identities as a front line. They converge on these arranged sequences, but each of them can also spin the music in a different direction and each of them has a very strong relationship to the rhythm section.”

Crump and Sorey describe the larger band as requiring more focused roles for each of them than the trio—a responsibility to support the soloists. But still, says Crump, one of the constants in Iyer’s bands is “trying to find ways to crack it open, even in that larger ensemble.”

For his part, Sorey says that the social consciousness that’s a natural part of the music is compounded in the sextet. “Any time I create music, I’m dealing with the time period we’re living in, politically,” he says. With the sextet, though, “The statement of what we’re dealing with politically carries out more because of how relentlessly changed it is.”

The convergence of disparate identities also reflects those classic sextets—think of Miles, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane on *Kind Of Blue*, or Kenny Dorham, Eric Dolphy and Joe Henderson on *Point Of Departure*. Lehman and Shim are “the mercurial note-slingers,” says Iyer. “They’re very different from one another, of course, but they have a longtime rapport through Steve’s octet, too.”

And then there’s Haynes as the Miles/Dorham axis of brass lyricism, with a touch of Miles-like electronic effects. “Rhythm is some-

how the center of what each of us does,” says Iyer, “including Graham—of course, being the son of Roy. But he’s also someone who’s traversed these different musical histories. He’s dealt with Gnawa musicians, musicians from Mali and Cameroon, and he did a lot with Indian musicians. So, he’s got this openness, temporally, in the sense that he will really take a long view on things. There’s something incredibly unhurried about his playing, but he can also rip it when he wants to, and his time is super strong.”

By the time the sextet convened for the *Far From Over* recording sessions, Iyer’s challenging compositions had been road-tested at gigs. In the studio, he added a few refinements, like the soli section for the horns on the outro to the album’s opener, the slow-boil anthem “Poles.”

But he was also careful not to over-arrange. “I wanted there to be space for the music to move, and points of reference. *Point Of Departure* is a great example, where, yeah, there are these kinds of signature moments where the arrangement matters. But then there are also these long stretches where you feel like anything could happen.”

Iyer rejects the easy dichotomy between “composition” and “improvisation.”

“I think the sort of dichotomy that we subscribe to is a little false, between what’s written down and what’s spontaneous, because, actually, there could be something that’s not written down that’s still very specific, and that’s worked on. And there also can be things that emerge in the moment that can be quite intricate and have a lot of formal detail in them. A form can emerge. It’s not just preordained.”

He gives as an example “Threnody,” a rich, mood-shifting track on *Far From Over*.

“It has, I guess, what I would call a harmonic rhythm, which is to say that, ‘OK, the chords change every this many beats.’ It’s something

like 10 beats or something. We don’t know what they’re changing to. We just know that that’s when they change, so then a form emerges through that process of changing on time.

“The other thing is that it has a target, which is that eventually we’re going to arrive at A flat, and then we’re going to move between A flat and F, just sort of alternate between those two. When we get there, that’s when the saxophone comes in, and we keep building from there.

“So, we have what’s sculpted as this trajectory. We don’t know the details of how it’s going to happen, but somehow we’re going to get from almost nothing being specified to this very identifiable sequence in the music. It has a certain kick to it, rhythmically. It has identifiable harmony. So it’s sort of like we move from something more ambiguous to something that’s quite resolved. It unfolds as this 8- or 10-minute piece of music, and all of it is very specific and careful, but it’s not written down.”

Iyer’s peripatetic life as a jazz musician and teacher makes for long days. For the Harvard job, he commutes from Harlem, where he lives with his wife, Christina Leslie, a research scientist, and their daughter. By 10:30 a.m. on the day of our interview, he already has met with a pair of students. He and his trio will be playing that night and the following night, two sets each, at Harvard Square’s Regattabar.

True to the form of Iyer’s ever-expanding circle of regulars, the set introduces yet another new player: bassist Nick Dunston, filling in for Crump, who is on tour with his band Rhombal. Iyer introduces this as Dunston’s very first gig with the band, but says he’s ready “to navigate through this music”—adding, “He learned it from my records.”

The trio begins at a ballad tempo, with softly sustained chords and Sorey’s precise swirl and splash of brushes before a heftier groove emerges with an abstracted take on Thelonious Monk’s “Work.” The music expands and contracts, Sorey—a wizard of layered rhythms and timbres—in constant dialogue with Iyer’s movement from repetitive rhythmic figures to rhapsodic outpouring, and a soft, mournful chord that introduces “For Amiri Baraka.” Dunston, meanwhile, holds the core of the beat with inventive patterns and adept shifts to arco work.

Iyer has said that he met Dunston—as well as another new face in the Iyer universe, Jeremy Dutton, a drummer from Houston who will be playing with the trio at the Village Vanguard the following week—through Iyer’s work as director of the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music.

“Every now and then, I have to tap one of these guys from there to fill in, and it’s been great, actually, getting to keep tabs on the community through that, and hear what’s coming, hear what’s next, and be part of that, be able to nurture it.”

DB