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JAZZ REVIEW

Pianist Vijay Iyer: Visionary musician defies expectations

By Howard Reich | Tribune critic
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Each generation produces a few jazz pianists who stand apart from their peers.

Today, visionary artists such as Danilo Perez, Jason Moran, Marcus Roberts and Gonzalo Rubalcaba ignore contemporary musical expectations. Instead, each creates a world of sound according to his own rules, blithely defying conventions that lesser pianists venerate.

To this list must be added Vijay Iyer, who has given Chicago memorable performances in past seasons but asserted himself as pianist more eloquently than ever over the weekend. Making his debut as headliner at the Jazz Showcase Friday night, Iyer led a trio, a format that by definition places immense responsibility for the progress of the music on a pianist's shoulders. Iyer met the challenge, and then some.

To observe that Iyer ignored the post-bebop orthodoxies of modern-day pianism would be a major understatement. Every phrase, every keyboard gesture represented an unexpected musical development. Big block chords suddenly gave way to pianissimo trills; abrupt silences preceded gnarly tone clusters; fast-running lines gathered sonic force, then dissipated into the ether. The sheer range of keyboard ideas Iyer drew upon challenged listeners to keep pace with him.

Moreover, his distinctive approach to rhythm—the pianist often accelerating or decelerating mid-phrase—further shattered the listener's sense of equilibrium.

So why did this far-flung musical syntax make sense? For starters, Iyer was playing mostly original music, self-styled compositions that built on the innovations of keyboard radicals from [Ahmad Jamal](#) to Cecil Taylor to Andrew Hill. So from the very conception of this music, Iyer bypassed traditional ideas of chord progression, melodic development and rhythmic pulse. Instead, he has forged a language based on startling musical contrasts, expressionistic turns of phrase and, above all, a keen sensitivity to tone. With Iyer, it's not the tune or the beat that count, but, rather, the substance of sound itself.

Because Iyer commands the technique of a virtuoso and the touch of a natural-born colorist, he can say more with timbre and tone than most can with a well-turned melody.

For this engagement, the pianist was joined by the nimble drummer Marcus Gilmore and the bassist Thomas Morgan, who followed the twists and turns in the music-making with remarkable poise, considering the challenges.

Yet even if Iyer had been playing alone, the journey would have been captivating.

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