

Jazz: Ahmad Jamal and Vijay Iyer's new CDs fine displays of invention, intuition

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As I've mentioned before, just because anyone can record and market a CD doesn't mean that they should. But they do. If anything, the amount of music being released that falls into the "jazz" genre has remained consistent in the past few years, even if the record-label names are increasingly unfamiliar. There's plenty of music to take in. Here's what I've been savoring (and obsessing over) lately:

Let's begin with pianist Ahmad Jamal. His use of the space between the notes in solos, and his willingness to let harmonic and rhythmic ideas evolve over time proved to be hugely influential on Miles Davis, who in turn was hugely influential on much of 20th-century music. Davis is 20 years gone, but Jamal isn't merely still around, he's thriving. "Blue Moon" (Jazz Village) is his newest display of offhand virtuosity, and its inventiveness and emotion would generate praise if he were half his age.

Jamal's keyboard touch is as distinctive as, say, Sonny Rollins' sax tone. It's a shame that he isn't celebrated more. After all, who else can transform a moldy piece of cheese like "Blue Moon" itself into a joyful 10-minute exploration? He's in his 80s now, but he still has a lot to teach.

Conversely, it's nice to see the current attention paid to Vijay Iyer, also a pianist and one who is reinvigorating the very idea of the piano trio. Like Jamal, Iyer leans heavily on covers on "Accelerando" (ACT), and his choices reflect the tastes of an individual enamored of pop and electronica as well as the history of jazz. While Miles Davis got to Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" as a point of departure first, Iyer stretches it out even further, turning the melody inside out, investigating the mysteries of the song. It's an expert dissection, and the kind of thing I'd like to hear at Starbucks. Are you listening, Starbucks?

Iyer also shows off his encyclopedic knowledge by taking on compositions by Henry Threadgill, Herbie Nichols, and as far as I can tell, the first ever "jazz" interpretation of a song by experimental electro-genius Flying Lotus ("mmhmm"). Iyer and his trio have something very special and intuitive going on right now.

Here's something that cannot be categorized: "Age of Energy," by Chicago Underground Duo (Northern Spy). Rob Mazurek blows his cornet through distorted prisms while drummer Chad Taylor alternates between subtlety and cacophony, while layers of mysterious electronics wash up against the improvisers. None of this would be as accomplished if it weren't for the musicianship of both: Mazurek knows the vocabularies of Don Cherry and Bill Dixon and Taylor creates polyphonic thunder. After 20 plays I'm left wondering: What is it? And how did I miss this pairing in the first place? I have some catching up to do. If you obtain this in an online version, there is a maniacal bonus track, "Moon Debris," out there. Look for it.

Trumpeter Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith just released a four-CD opus, "Ten Freedom Summers" (Cuneiform) — his trenchant, expressive, personal take on the U.S. civil rights movement. At four-plus hours, it's an imposing sea of music and a great deal to absorb. The tracks alternate between sections of abstract chamber music and pieces featuring Smith's wise, investigative trumpet front and center, supported by some of the best avant-garde jazz thinkers working, including pianist Anthony Davis. Smith is one of a handful of the most fascinating, exploratory musicians in the art world right now, and I'm willing to follow along on his sonic detours. It's worth an adventure-bound listener's time, and this may as well turn out to be the most challenging (and emotionally rewarding) release of 2012.

Set list. Convergence will join forces with singer Rene Marie at Dazzle on May 31 and June 1 for a summit of local creativity. ... The Adam Bodine Trio plays a free show as part of City Park Jazz on June 3. ... Pianist Danilo Perez is slated for the Mount Vernon Country Club on June 20 and top-flight group the Cookers (Billy Harper, Cecil McBee, Eddie Henderson, George Cables and Billy Hart) appear there June 28. ... Guitarist Bill Frisell interprets the music of John Lennon at the Boulder Theater on June 23.

