




VIJAY IYER & CRAIG TABORN

BUILDING SOME



A spirit of camaraderie and collaboration permeated the room when Vijay Iyer and Craig Taborn took the stage of Greenwich Village's Le Poisson Rouge during this year's Winter Jazz Fest.

Before a densely packed house, and in a coveted time slot during a two-night focus on artists who record for the ECM label, the two vibrant pianists bravely faced off on Steinway grands.

They embarked on a wholly improvised concert, blending thematic and atmospheric ideas, moving fluidly between dissonance and consonance. Though cooked up on the spot, a certain compositional logic readily was apparent. As a whole, the pianists generated a palpable sense of a duet with an ensemble sensibility, creating a spontaneous musical entity.

Although Iyer and Taborn have been performing as a duo intermittently for more than a dozen years, their first official album just has been released. *The Transitory Poems* (ECM) was recorded at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Budapest on March 12, 2018.

Though each pianist is distinctive in his own right, commonalities bind the pair, including having worked with and/or been heavily influenced by AACM artists such as Roscoe Mitchell and Muhal Richard Abrams. Both pianists also are bright,

THING MAJESTIC

BY JOSEF WOODARD | PHOTO BY MONICA JANE FRISSELL



Craig Tabor (left) and Vijay Iyer pay tribute to artists and pianists who recently have passed on *Transitory Poems*.

sophisticated lights of the rebolstered New York contingent of ECM's diverse roster. In 2017, the label released Iyer's sextet album, *Far From Over*, and Taborn's quartet recording, *Daylight Ghosts*.

The duo debut, though, is something unique. The album's title is taken from a 1994 interview that Chris Funkhouser conducted with Cecil Taylor (1929–2018). The album's program includes memorial tributes to Taylor, along with other important jazz pianists who recently have passed—including Abrams (1930–2017) and Geri Allen (1957–2017).

As Iyer explained, "We decided, in retrospect, that it would be an homage, essentially to Geri and Muhal and Cecil, and the [visual] artist Jack Whitten. They all passed [away recently], and they were all on our minds and directly impacted us."

Early on a Sunday afternoon following their triumphant festival show, the pair faced off in a very different context, speaking across a boardroom table in ECM's New York office. During a rangy interview, they swapped ideas, theories, jokes and piano talk from various angles. Below are edited excerpts from the conversation.

DownBeat: Do you have any reflections on last night's performance at Le Poisson Rouge?

Vijay Iyer: It felt like it added up nicely to something. Every concert is really its own thing. Having made the album and listened to it enough times now, it's almost like, "I have to not do that, to not think in that way." The focus is on process for us and on just managing the energy as the time passes, and creating a certain spectrum of energies, a certain kind of variety, and also having a trajectory. But we don't often sit, in retrospect, and say, "Oh, we should have

done this."

I've learned a lot from Craig, since he's been doing something similar in a solo context for many years, before we started together. [to Taborn] I remember a question I asked you early on: "How does one think about form in that context, when you're starting from scratch?" I know how I do it with a trio, for example. That's more about selecting from repertoire. All the set lists for my band are spontaneous, and you probably do something similar. That's about, "OK, where are we right now and what needs to happen? How do we want to redirect the flow of energy?"

But in the context of something where you're just building from scratch, it's something else. We've used different strategies over the years, to force the process. But maybe that just trained us to think about it efficiently.

Craig Taborn: One of the biggest differences, even though both contexts are driven by improvisation, is that when you have pieces or those information sets, they are a sort of armature around which you can improvise. You can either really use those strongly, as nodal points, or use them to redirect a flow, but they are actual things, so whatever you're draping over them is already formed.

But with what we're doing, it's almost the opposite. It's the inverse, where you have to discover what the armature is. Sometimes, it's very evident that we've arrived at a thing that is the strong statement that is buttressing everything that had come before and probably will with everything after. We're making an aesthetic determination that we've arrived at something, and maybe it's time to move to another space.

It has been interesting, especially with two

people. When you do it solo, you have that awareness and then dismiss it—or not. But with the both of us, we're aware of that together. That's the challenge and also the art of this process. Every time we've done it, there has been a unified sense of what this emerging structure is. As you go on through the evening, it's established: OK, that happened, and you can determine pacing.

I use, in the most abstract sense, the term "narrative," almost more architecturally. It describes just how things are unfolding, the pacing and sound and register—all the kinds of elements of music go into that. But it's really about determining what form emerges from these structural points. Toward the end of the concert, this structure has emerged and there have been strong points. These possibilities have opened themselves.

So, it really is a musical entity built "from scratch" at this point?

Iyer: Yeah, it is. It is also about, "How do we key into what each other is doing?" [laughs] Sometimes, one of us lays something down and the other encounters it and interacts with it. Maybe it can be in a soloistic way or a co-constructive way. Out of those different logics or different relational maneuvers, something starts to accumulate out of all of that.

But we also have the sense of, "OK, that's probably enough." Often, sooner rather than later, we'll decide, "OK, let's take a turn here."

Taborn: That's the biggest danger for all improvising of that sort. In the attempt to figure out what one is doing, once you determine, "Oh, this is what we're doing," you almost start to fall behind the process of improvisation. It's really dangerous to say, "OK, this is it!" So, we're done? [laughs] You also have to ask to invite an interrogation and a development. That's what's great about improvisation.

It was probably already there for both of us, but playing with Roscoe really gets you into understanding that, so you don't bog down.

I first heard this duo perform in Norway, at the Moldejazz festival. Where did that concert fall, in terms of this project's overall life span?

Iyer: That was in 2017. We'd been playing duo concerts for about 10 years by then. It started inside of Roscoe Mitchell's Note Factory, in the early 2000s. So, that dates it back about 18 years, actually. It has been an evolving process. Even the process of listening and relating in this particular way was born, basically, in the apprenticeship mode with Roscoe Mitchell.

The first duo concerts were at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. We built it over a week and then we did a couple of nights' worth of concerts. That really felt like the beginning of something.

You both appear on the epic, 21-disc Art Ensemble box set released by ECM last year.

Iyer: Oh, yes, with *Far Side* [recorded in 2007 by Roscoe Mitchell's The Note Factory, featuring both Iyer and Taborn on piano]. And [Wadada Leo Smith's 1979 album] *Divine Love* is on there—that's one of the greatest albums of all time, without a doubt.

You belong to the group of musicians connected to ECM and the AACM.

Iyer: That's right. I started recording for ECM in 2013 and people kept asking me, "What's it like to be on the same label as Chick Corea

and showed me two things about where to voice things in the register. It was like a light bulb. It was about the overtones. He was saying, "See, these are doing that, so you might put that here. ..." It was just a little thing and he wasn't being invasive. I was saying, "Oh, of course, that's it." I was freaked out. That was within the first year of my moving to New York [from Minneapolis].

Was Muhal a guiding light for both of you?

Iyer: Certainly. I met him when I was visiting New York in '96 or '97. I had talks with him. He gave me some recommendations and just sort of kept me in the mix. He was always open and

interview with Muhal, who spoke simply, yet profoundly.

Iyer: Yes, always. Then the concert on Sunday with The Trio [Abrams, Mitchell and Lewis]. That was one of Muhal's final performances. People were in tears after that. We were lucky to share the planet with him in those years.

The Transitory Poems was recorded last year in Budapest. What was special about that particular show?

Iyer: It was a beautiful place to record. The instruments were really nice. Things added up in a nice way. Each night [on that tour] had its own discoveries, but a lot came out of this Budapest concert. We had some nice, compact statements of certain ideas that made sense to piece together. I think we reordered a few things and maybe there were a couple of things we cut, but it was mostly that concert. It's nice to have a whole evening intact, so you get a sense of the arc of a performance.

Craig, how different is the context between a solo piano setting and a duo with the same instrument? Is it exponentially different?

Taborn: It is, but the more relative factor is the other pianist. I've done other piano duos.

Iyer: So have I.

Taborn: From the outside, people seem to wonder, "Oh, there are two pianos. How do you negotiate that?" But it's really about negotiating two pianists [laughs]. That's the real key factor.

Iyer: Because the two-piano problem has basically been solved already. We've had centuries of that. Stravinsky and Stockhausen have dealt with that.

You just want people to think orchestrationally and compositionally—one of the things we learned from Roscoe. [to Taborn] I remember you described early on "a strategy of avoidance." One of Roscoe's pet peeves is when people follow each other. That has a way of bogging things down. It means you're second-guessing someone and not really contributing to the music. Then it becomes more about how you tune into these different streams of information and hear it all as counterpoint, rather than try to play each other's shit back at them.

But then there are moments where we just merge. It's beyond imitation: We're building this thing and we're reinforcing something. Then it's actually more orchestrational.

Taborn: Absolutely. That kind of coincidence occurs through a process of actually thinking the same way, not that I'm listening to Vijay and then aping his thing. It's like, "Oh, we've arrived at that because there is some synchronicity in our ..."

Iyer: Process.

Taborn: Our process. That's a wonderful thing. That's not following, by definition. It's something else [laughs].

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"EVERY SOUND YOU MAKE IS A CHOICE, AND IT'S A CHOICE MADE IN RELATION TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING AROUND YOU." — CRAIG TABORN

and Gary Burton and Pat Metheny and Keith Jarrett and so on?" I would say, "Well, I'm on the same label as Lester Bowie." That, to me, was very important. What about [Bowie's] *Avant Pop*, or what about Wadada [Leo Smith] and his *Divine Love*? There were all those seminal Art Ensemble albums I loved—*Nice Guys*, *The Third Decade*.

What defined ECM, to me, before anything else, was all of that stuff. There was a sense of continuity that made sense to me, because I had apprenticed with all these guys and collaborated with them—and continue to. I learned so much about music in their presence. Certainly, seeing the Art Ensemble live and seeing Roscoe and Malachi [Favors Maghostut] and all of them in different guises in the '90s was formative for me. I wouldn't be the musician I am without all of them. Getting to work with them in different ways over the years has been critical.

I hear that mode of listening and that mode of collaborative creation as one of the defining elements of ECM records. When the history is told, people tend to foreground all of this other stuff, but to me, that [AACM-affiliated] stuff is key. I think if you asked Manfred [Eicher, ECM founder and head], he'd probably agree.

Taborn: It's also evident to me. My first work with Roscoe, for instance, was on the *Nine To Get Ready* recording [made in 1997]. I was playing Roscoe's music for the first time and beginning to learn that approach to improvising, while working with Manfred. The whole thing is of a piece for me, in my memory.

I also met Muhal then. He attended the rehearsal, just to show support. He came over

always had some very insightful things to say about music and about the world. Also, I was working with Steve Coleman in the '90s, and that was around the time when Steve was getting to know Muhal, so he was often around.

I was also very close with George Lewis, starting in '94. He became an informal and formal mentor. He was on my doctoral committee [for a Ph.D. earned at the University of California, Berkeley]. We've been in league ever since.

But Muhal was really important. He had this way of making all these connections across disparate fields of inquiry. He could make philosophical utterances in very plain-spoken language that would stay with you. There was something he told me, in the '90s, about Monk. He said, "Yeah, Monk was always creating." I still think about that phrase almost every day. Monk was a composer and an improviser and a bandleader and a piano player. All of those things were somehow one thing. Even as the decades went by and he was playing the same music, he was still creating in every moment.

You can understand that sensibility and see how it carries over into someone like Muhal or Roscoe or Wadada. Even when you have fixed elements in your music, the way you relate to them and the process is very open. Every sound you make is a choice, and it's a choice made in relation to everything happening around you and everything that's part of the fabric of your music.

Vijay, the 2017 Ojai Music Festival, which you directed, featured a memorable performance by The Trio and also an AACM-themed onstage