

Hear This



Eminently versatile and inventive, jazz pianist Jason Moran points the way toward adventurism with populist appeal

By Sam Prestianni

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Pianist **Jason Moran** holds a rare distinction in contemporary jazz: He's not only one of the genre's foremost twentysomething virtuosos -- capable of slinking from old-school boogie to futuristic abstraction in a single bound -- but is also an award-winning composer, an authoritative bandleader, and arguably the only younger-generation visionary signed to a major label with a presumably mainstream fan base. On last year's solo venture *Modernistic*, his critically lauded fourth recording for Blue Note, the pianist charms the average jazz audience by demonstrating his deep knowledge of the tradition with a sober harmonic reading of the standard "Body and Soul," the stunningly evocative original "Moran Tonk Circa 1936," and a subtle though fleet-fingered take on the title track, a bouncy tune by stride piano master James P. Johnson.

Beyond conversing with the jazz elders by exploring the familiar forms of their legacy, Moran also honors hip hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa with a trippy, percussive extrapolation on the rap classic "Planet Rock" and innovates within his own sharply defined but broad compositional parameters on the somber meditation "Gangsterism on Irons" and its groovier, shadowy counterpart "Gangsterism on a Lunchtable." The pianist rounds out this colorful repertoire with an appropriately moody reading of classical composer Robert Schumann's "Auf Einer Burg/In a Fortress," a sweeping, impressionistic portrait of avant-garde maestro Muhal Richard Abrams' "Time Into Space Into Time," and a sensitive though far from saccharine ballad of his own, "Gentle Shifts South."

Eminently versatile and inventive—within largely acceptable conventions—Moran points the way toward adventurism with populist appeal.