

“How do you live on in the face of this?”

Defiant Life: Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith confront Gaza genocide

Erik Schreiber
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Defiant Life (2025), the latest collaboration between pianist Vijay Iyer and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, is a subtle and moving meditation on steadfastness in the face of violent oppression. This music, which falls between free improvisation and fixed composition, is the jazz artists’ conscious response to Israel’s ongoing campaign of genocide against the Palestinians. To their credit, Iyer and Smith have attempted to give musical expression to questions of burning contemporary urgency, while capturing the enduring human desire for liberation.

Iyer, born in 1971, has been composing and recording music since the mid-1990s. He has collaborated with veteran avant-garde jazz musicians such as Andrew Cyrille and Reggie Workman, as well as younger jazz (e.g., Linda May Han Oh) and hip-hop (e.g., Das Racist) artists. Social and political themes are not new to Iyer; his compositions have addressed topics such as surveillance after the September 11 attacks (*In What Language*, 2003) and the Flint, Michigan water crisis (“Song for Flint,” 2019).

During his long career, Smith, born in 1941, has collaborated with noted avant-garde musicians such as saxophonists Anthony Braxton and Henry Threadgill and guitarist Henry Kaiser. Smith has often dealt with African American history in works like *Ten Freedom Summers* (2012), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Music. He adopted the name Wadada when he became a Rastafarian in the mid-1980s. Originally from Mississippi, he is now based in New Haven, Connecticut, where he has encouraged the local music scene.

Iyer and Smith have been playing together on and off for at least 20 years. Their first album as a duo was A

Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke (2016). Having decided that it was time for another collaboration, the two met in Lugano, Switzerland, to record an album. While there, the musicians could not help but talk about the genocide. “How do you live on in the face of this?” Iyer asked NPR. The music that resulted from their discussions is meant to express the theme of defiance, not only through martyrdom, but also through survival in the face of adversity, he added.

Each musician brought one composition to the recording sessions, which lasted for two days. These two pieces became “tentpoles for the whole project,” according to Iyer. “They informed everything else that was in this suite of music,” he added.

“Kite (for Refaat Alareer)” is Iyer’s contribution. Its title alludes to the Palestinian poet who was murdered by a targeted Israeli airstrike in December 2023. A kite is the central image of Alareer’s final poem “If I Must Die,” which was shared around the world after Alareer’s murder.

The piece begins with a low, quiet Fender Rhodes electric piano, which Iyer plays with tremolo. Smith’s trumpet enters, offering a brief phrase. Throughout the album, Smith’s playing recalls the tremulous style of latter-day Miles Davis. Smith answers his first phrase, then repeats the answer, modulating it downward. Iyer then introduces new chords that move in unexpected directions. The mood lightens, and Smith’s trumpet reaches gently, modestly upward. His tone becomes surer, and he hits a sustained high note before laying out. Iyer’s final high chords chime like a music box. The song evokes the conjuring of a new life out of the rubble.

“Floating River Requiem (for Patrice Lumumba)” is

the composition that Smith brought to the recording sessions. Lumumba led the Congo's struggle against Belgian imperialism and became the newly independent state's first prime minister. Independence remained hollow, not genuine. Less than seven months after its proclamation, Lumumba was assassinated on the orders of the Belgian government and of US President Dwight Eisenhower. Though Lumumba was a man of remarkable bravery and principle, his nationalism and his orientation toward the Congolese bourgeoisie would have rendered him incapable of establishing democracy and equality in the Congo had he survived.

The song begins with Iyer's low rumbles on the piano. Smith then plays a developing theme in a quavering tone, squeaking occasionally. It is as though he is speaking with effort. Several times, Smith plays the subtonic, stretching it out and making the listener itch for resolution. Iyer plays a chord-based solo with a staccato attack and occasional dissonances. Smith re-enters and again stretches out the subtonic. The song evokes defiant courage in the face of danger.

The other songs were composed on the spot following preparatory discussions between Iyer and Smith. The resulting album exhibits thematic and structural unity. A brief, quiet prelude sets the scene for the music to follow. "Sumud," which is Arabic for "steadfastness," begins with Iyer playing "electronics" that produce high-pitched, sometimes dissonant, sine waves. The electronics reappear in "Elegy: The Pilgrimage." The album concludes with the solemn "Procession: Defiant Life." At more than 10 minutes each, these pieces are longer than the album's two centerpieces.

The music on this album is quiet overall, even tentative at times. The musicians leave space for each other and for occasional silences. Iyer echoes or comments on Smith's statements, and vice versa. But although Iyer comes to the fore during certain passages, Smith tends to dominate, which is perhaps inevitable, given his instrument. His phrases sometimes center on one note, from which he ventures a few steps in one or the other direction before returning. When he plays his trumpet with a mute, he inescapably invites stylistic comparisons with Davis. His notes sometimes sound like breath, the call of the human voice or a cry of pain.

While *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke* included

briefer songs that Iyer described to NPR as "smaller episodes," *Defiant Life* comprises longer songs that each incorporate shifts in tone and dynamics. It is a dialogue not only between the two musicians, but also between the free play of artistic intuition and the stricture of compositional form.

"This recording session was conditioned by our ongoing sorrow and outrage over the past year's cruelties, but also by our faith in human possibility," said Iyer in press materials for the album. Certainly, overtones of sorrow are evident in much of the music, especially in "Elegy: The Pilgrimage." At other moments, as on "Kite," the musicians express hope. Yet the album generally seems to convey mourning and fragility more than it conveys defiance. One might wish for more musical boldness. The tentative quality to the music may indicate the musicians' skepticism about whether the monumental brutality of Israel and its imperialist backers can be overcome.

Nevertheless, their decision to protest the ongoing war crimes must be welcomed. Iyer and Smith have created a sensitive, evocative album that captures our current moment while speaking to enduring qualities of the human spirit.



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