

Jason Moran: Ten Blue Note, CD review

Jason Moran's Ten Blue Note is full of wonderful moments. Rating: * * * * *

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Jason Moran

Ten Blue Note

Blue Note, £10.99

To say of a jazz pianist that he can play in every style, and embrace a hundred influences beyond jazz, is a backhanded compliment. It could imply that he hasn't got a personal voice of his own.

The astonishing thing about 35-year-old New York pianist Jason Moran is that he unites both elements. He embraces everything, but is always his own man; indeed you could say he's never more personal than when he's inhabiting someone else's skin.



Focus and generosity: New York jazz pianist Jason Moran

This new CD reunites him with the bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits, a partnership that's now lasted a good 15 years, and the music making has a pleasurable sense of being long matured.

On this album, Moran ranges over Leonard Bernstein, Jimi Hendrix, the old-time minstrel Bert Williams and even Conlon Nancarrow, the man who wrote piano Studies so complex and rapid that only mechanical-player pianos could perform them. That piece – Study No6 – is actually more noticeable for its slouching wit than its velocity, though on To Bob Vatel of Paris Moran shows his fingers can rival Nancarrow's machines.

What makes Moran special is the way his wide embrace goes hand in hand with a fascination for the humblest building blocks of jazz. He probes away at the same chord change, approaching it from different angles, revoicing it, until it gives up its secrets. In the Nancarrow study, the building block is a simple rising and falling scale, which Moran finds so intriguing he can't resist going back to it on a later track, his own composition, Gangsterism, which he's been musing on for 10 years – thus the title Gangsterism Over 10 Years.

The combination of focus and generosity allows for an emotional weight one rarely hears in jazz nowadays. It shines out in RFK in the Land of Apartheid, inspired by Bobby Kennedy's visit to South Africa in 1968. The almost-immobile bass suggests suffering and endurance; above it, hope blossoms in a sudden radiance. It's a wonderful moment on a CD that's full of them.