

# DOWNBEAT

January 2007

VOLUME 74 - NUMBER 1

## Rudresh Mahanthappa

### Codebook

PI RECORDINGS 121

★★★½

Indian-American alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, often heard in the duo Raw Materials with pianist Vijay Iyer, as well as with Iyer's band, has a fresh, transnational take on jazz that weds the cyclic rhythms of Indian classical music to ensemble improvisation. One immediate reference point is Steve Coleman, but Mahanthappa is his own man.

On his first Pi album, *Mother Tongue*, he derived tunes from the speech patterns of Indian-Americans responding to a question about language. This time, he zooms out from language to code itself as a compositional tool.

"Play It Again Sam" even alludes to the telegraphic sounds of Morse code. (Mahanthappa's titles are witty. And hey, kids, there's a fun code game inside, referencing a great American poet that might surprise you!) The

music is energetic, passionate and often surprising, though also occasionally monotonous, and the drums and bass sometimes feel like an afterthought.

Mahanthappa's sax sound—big, blunt and gruff—is something to behold, especially in the lower register, as he rapidly flaps over long, modal phrases, usually slurring, sometimes landing with a wide, wowing vibrato. I especially like the assertive, explosive opening cut

(facetiously named "The Decider") and the relentless "Wait It Through." On these, it felt like each player was dancing in a shared rhythmic space, having a jazz-like conversation. Ditto for the frenzied workout between Mahanthappa's spunky staccato and drummer Dan Weiss on "Frontburner."

Elsewhere, the rhythm section adds density, volume, color or drama, pushing rhythmic modulations with accelerations and decelerations, but Iyer's driving left hand and Mahanthappa's melodies are strong medicine. The rhythm players don't feel necessary. The falling-over-a-cliff momentum of "D (Dee-Dee)" seems to come from sax and piano alone, though bassist François Moutin plays a great solo. Imagine drums and bass with a boogie-woogie pianist.

This is original music well worth hearing. "My Sweetest," the closing cut, explores the shimmering transcendence of certain John Coltrane ballads, a place Raw Materials often goes.

—Paul de Barros

**Codebook:** The Decider; Refresh; Enhanced Performance; Further And In Between; Play It Again Sam; Frontburner; D (Dee-Dee); Wait It Through; My Sweetest. (57:23)

**Personnel:** Rudresh Mahanthappa, alto saxophone; Vijay Iyer, piano; François Moutin, bass; Dan Weiss, drums.

Ordering info: [pirecordings.com](http://pirecordings.com)

## The HOT BOX

CDs	CRITICS >>	John Corbett	Jim Macnie	Paul de Barros
<b>Russell Malone</b> <i>Live At The Jazz Standard</i>		★★★★	★★★	★★★½
<b>Various Artists</b> <i>Nina Simone: Remixed And Reimagined</i>		★★★	★★★½	★★
<b>Rudresh Mahanthappa</b> <i>Codebook</i>		★★★½	★★★★	★★★½
<b>Flat Earth Society</b> <i>Psychoscout</i>		★★★½	★★★	★★

### Rudresh Mahanthappa, *Codebook*

He's always been a bruiser—no question he's one of the most physical saxophonists in action these days—but more and more he's developed a sense of grace. The rhythm section is often pushing back here, but Mahanthappa rolls with their punches without losing the music's physicality. —Jim Macnie

The time shifts and supercomplex compositions are beguiling, as is the marvelous playing. Clear lineage from Steve Coleman and M-Base, but putting his own spin on their intricate semiotic web.

—John Corbett