

The Best Jazz of 2007

[11 December 2007] by Will Layman

Each year, I imagine, jazz record sales are down and the days of jazz as a significant cultural force seem more distant. Why, then, is the music so fresh and vital, with scores of recordings and bands that suggest a creativity not only undiminished but at a particular high? Perhaps, with commercial expectations largely vanished for all but the most popular jazz musicians (a vocalist like Diana Krall, say, or the perennially melodic guitarist Pat Metheny), jazz musicians have truly embraced their own varied, radically inclusive visions. My 2007 list is split almost evenly between major labels and the wonderful independents. This a great sign that Blue Note and Verve have tempered their expectation that each jazz record ought to be another Norah Jones CD and are supporting expansive, sometimes daring music. That said, if I listed another ten discs, they would almost all be on independents such as Pi, Songlines, Cryptogramophone, and the like. Jazz continues to blossom in every corner of the yard (and saxophonist Chris Potter seems to be a petal on many of the flowers). Thus, the year's finest reissue and a dozen new treasures from the year nearly past.

Robert Glasper

In My Element

(BLUE NOTE)

1

James Carney Group

Green-Wood

(SONGLINES)

2

Herbie Hancock

River: The Joni Letters

(VERVE)

3

Chris Potter Underground

Follow the Red Line, Live at the Village Vanguard

(SUNNYSIDE)

7

Chris Potter, album-by-album and show-by-show, is building a claim to greatness. He has paid his dues as a crucial and versatile sideman (from Dave Holland to Steely Dan), but the notion that there is something generic about his playing is now forever vanquished. This year he released two discs on the same day: a challenging studio recording for a ten-piece group (including strings and double-reeds), and a live date from his "Underground" quartet featuring Craig Taborn's Fender Rhodes electric piano, Adam Rogers on electric guitar, and Nate Smith on drums. As varied as the sounds are on the tentet disc, it is the plugged-in Vanguard disc that seems utterly kaleidoscopic. Though the use of funk rhythms in jazz would seem to have been played out decades ago, Potter's group uses groove the way a master chef uses onions. And without a bass player! The magic is in the drama that each player brings to his solos, which each build like a scene from a Hitchcock film. Top honors, as so often, go to Taborn's versatile Rhodes. But they are Potter's fiendish tunes and his group conception. In a year that saw the passing of Michael Brecker, Potter seems to have emerged as a steely-toned tenor player who blends harmonic adventure with groove.

Kenny Werner
Lawn Chair Society
(BLUE NOTE)

4

Terence Blanchard
A Tale of God's Will (A Requiem for Katrina)
(BLUE NOTE)

5

Joe Lovano and Hank Jones
Kids: Live at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola
(BLUE NOTE)

6

Michael Blake Sextet
Amor de Cosmos
(SONGLINES)

8

**Charlie Hunter and Bobby Previte as
Groundtruther Plus John Medeski**
Altitude
(THIRSTY EAR)

9

Dee Dee Bridgewater
Red Earth: A Malian Journey
(EMARCY)

10

Paul Motian Trio
Live at the Village Vanguard, Volume One
(WINTER AND WINTER)

11

Nels Cline Singers
Draw Breath
(CRYPTOGRAMOPHONE)

12