

Best Of 2020

For the entirety of its 100-plus years, jazz has represented a dialectic between commentary on the real world and the arching aspirations of the imagination. In giving expression to this fraught and fertile counterpoint, of course, jazz is not alone among the arts. Indeed, this soul-drenched conversation is perhaps the heart of all Art. But there is something unique about music; about its hold on the spirit; about its power to agitate and soothe, to challenge and comfort, to hold us tight and to help us soar. From the earliest days of its rising, jazz has consistently displayed a capacity for mordant commentary about the full range of our downbeat worldly experiences, from laughable society foibles through rampant hypocrisies to pervasive injustice. At the same time, the music has expressed our most ethereal aspirations. Which form of the music is which is itself an imponderable: I may hear Louis Armstrong's clarion trumpet as the musical counterpart to his verbal laceration of President Eisenhower for his dithering on civil rights, and you may hear the same solo as some sort of overture to a romance.

If music did not have these mysteries around it, I wonder if it would be able to captivate us as it does. I don't know. But I do know I am not alone in having found in jazz this year not just an antidote to global gloom or an escape from pervasive anxieties, but an affirmation of the permanence of so much we value and cling to. I should say "I," not "we," because one of the many sobering things to take from this vexed and vexing year is how little "we" have in common, at least in our civic selves.

Still, I return to this truth: jazz, despite its grounding in social realms of oppression, disdain, poverty, and legalized violence, is a music of boundless joy, warmth, spontaneity, openness, virtuosity, individual vision and collective sympathy, hope, possibility, and transcendence. And it has been all of that this year, from the late-career starbursts of a life-long traditionalist (Jimmy Heath in his 90s) and a life-long innovator (Carla Bley, mid 80s) to the innovations of the latest new wave from London (Nubya Garcia, to name one among many). For personal reasons, I found myself drawn this year to the music's quieter side. But that is not to say museum pieces or staid melodies. One of the year's surprises was the graceful, haunting collaboration between two of the music's most restless inventors: the pianist Kris Davis and the saxophonist Ingrid Laubrick on their stunning work, *Blood Moon*.

You doubtless found your own way through the year with jazz of your own choosing. Kim Kleinman, whose piece is right beneath this one, responded to other music, and I commend to you his typically insightful year-end summing up. If I've a point to make, it's this: for the 50 years I've listened to jazz, it has been the sound track of the world I wanted to live in, sometimes by reflecting the world as it is, other times by limning an invisible world I longed for. So, it's no surprise, in this year unlike any other, that jazz in 2020 did its customary work, more proficiently than ever.

Here are 38 releases from the year (35 new and 3 recovered), recordings that time and again helped me stay in this world and another, here, there, and everywhere.

(* denotes a special favorite)

Rez Abbassi, Django-shift
Ambrose Akinmusire, On the Tender Spot of Every Calloused Moment
* Susan Alcorn Quintet, Pedernal
JD Allen - Toys/Die Dreaming
Artemis, Artemis
Callum Au & Claire Martin, Songs and Stories
John Beaseley, MONK'estra Plays John Beasley
Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers, Just Coolin'
* Carla Bley, Life Goes On
Alan Braufman, The Fire Still Burns
Chick Corea, Plays
Aaron Diehl, The Vagabond
* Bill Frisell, Valentine
Elliot Galvin, Live in Paris
Nubya Garcia, Source
Jimmy Greene, While Looking Up
Jimmy Heath, Love Letter
* Fred Hersch, Songs from Home
* Brian Landrus, For Now
* Ingrid Laubrock & Kris Davis, Blood Moon
Charles Lloyd, 8: Kindred Spirits
* Rudresh Mahanthappa, Hero Trio
Gregoire Maret, Roman Collin, Bill Frisell, Americana
Brad Mehldau, Suite: April 2020
* Ron Miles, Rainbow Sign
Thelonious Monk, Palo Alto
Aaron Parks, Little Big II: Dreams of a Mechanical Man
Enrico Pieranunzi, Common View
Joshua Redman, RoundAgain
Sonny Rollins, Rollins in Holland
* Maria Schneider, Data Lords
John Scofield, Swallow Tales
Walter Smith III, In Common 2
Kevin Sun, The Sustain of Memory
Tani Tabbal Trio, Now Then
* Marcin Wasilewski Trio with Joe Lovano, Arctic Riff
Webber/Morris Big Band, Both are Tru
Immanuel Wilkins, Omega