

Best Recordings of 2011

2011 was a fantastic year for jazz music. Bassist Esperanza Spalding won the Grammy's coveted Best New Artist Award; local artists such as Ben Williams and Warren Wolf released stellar, debut recordings to rave reviews; Washington, DC served as the backdrop for the Ertegun Jazz Series-- a jazz series born of a partnership between Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Turkish Embassy, and the Boeing Company in honor of the late Ahmet Ertegun; and jazz festivals all across the country flourished with mostly jazz heavy line-ups. Conversely, jazz also experienced a few heartaches, namely the federal government's elimination of the NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship program (the 2012 program will be the last ceremony), Steve Stoute's verbal lashing aimed at members of NARAS for the audacity they showed in choosing Esperanza Spalding over Justin Bieber or Drake for the Grammy's Best New Artist award; the Grammy's subsequent elimination of several jazz and Latin jazz related categories (to be fair, the Grammy's made cuts to several other award categories), and, less seriously, one of jazz's brightest stars renounced jazz in favor of Black American music. But through the ashes, jazz rose like a phoenix. Artists like Christian McBride and Ron Carter released big band recordings; Craig Taborn, Esperanza Spalding, and Jason Moran stayed atop critics' lists; popular jazz artists joined forces to make awesome group recordings; and the great Sonny Rollins and Ornette Coleman recorded together yet again.

Though the Grammy Awards may not recognize the effort and passion that goes into making jazz music, and others are disinterested in the un-coolness of jazz, here are my picks for this year's best recordings.

Best recordings of 2011 (in no particular order, except for #s 1 and 2):

1. *Pinnacle*- Freddie Hubbard

There's no better record out in 2011, than Freddie Hubbard's *Pinnacle*. The late, great trumpet master set such a standard for excellence that even the most talented jazz musician can only muster coming a close second to Hubbard's powerful, fiery trumpeting. This previously unreleased gem is a great addition to any jazz fans collection. Thank me later.



2. *Sweet Thunder*- Delfeayo Marsalis

Coming in second to Freddie Hubbard is definitely not a bad thing in the case of *Sweet Thunder*. The least popular musical Marsalis demonstrated on this recording that popularity does not equal talent. What Duke Ellington did with a full orchestra (*Sweet Thunder* is Marsalis' re-working on the Duke's classic *Such Sweet Thunder*) Marsalis did varying between an octet and other small ensemble formats. A debate ensued about how wise a choice it was for a trombonist/producer to remake Ellington's music, but Marsalis struck gold by listening to his own voice. Winard Harper, Tiger Okashi, Victor Goines, Mulgrew Miller, and brothers Branford and Jason Marsalis are a few of the disc's key players, and their performances put this recording on a whole other stratosphere of awesome.

3. *Captain Black Big Band*- Captain Black Big Band

If an award were to be given out to the hardest working man in jazz, there's no doubt that pianist Orrin Evans would win. The bandleader, who is also a member of the Sean Jones quintet and supergroup Tarbaby (comprised of Evans on piano, Nasheet Waits on drums, and Eric Revis on bass), formed his own big band affectionately named the Captain Black Big Band. Members of the big band contributed compositions to the recording and the band performed them with conviction. The live recording really captured the energy of the band and the crowd as the two seemed to really vibe off of each other. Fantastic record.

4. *Songs of Mirth and Melancholy*- Branford Marsalis and Joey Calderazzo

This recording has received mixed reviews, but it's solid in the eyes of this writer. The long time bandmates (Calderazzo is a regular member of the Branford Marsalis Quartet) are in top form and they played together beautifully.

5. *(re) Conception*- Helen Sung

Three words: Fab-u-lous. Sung's flawless as a pianist and, with Lewis Nash and Peter Washington serving as a supporting cast, she can do no wrong.

6. *Fe/Faith*- Gonzalo Rubalcaba

Spirituality has always been a big part of jazz and John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* offers probably the most tangible example. *Fe/Faith* is no Coltrane copycat, but Rubalcaba definitely shares his spirit and his appreciation for the gift of music. There's something inherently beautiful about solo piano, but it's even more beautiful

when a pianist is in touch with the source from which the gift flows.

7. *James Farm*- James Farm

Joshua Redman, Aaron Parks, Matt Penman, and Eric Harland are James Farm. I interviewed Redman a few months ago and asked him what inspired the group's unique name, and, while I can't say that I believed his "it has no significance" explanation, one thing's undeniable: these guys sound great together. They're probably the musical equivalent of the NBA's Miami Heat, each member strong and capable in his own right. It's a fun record with songs that offer very memorable melodies. The saying goes that if you can't tap your toes, then it ain't jazz. I'd like to offer that if you can't tap your toes, then it ain't James Farm.

8. *To Hear from There*- Wayne Wallace

I've done best jazz lists for a couple of years now, and I like adding lesser known artists to the list. Wayne Wallace is a veteran on the west coast scene, but he was thrust into the national spotlight after earning a Grammy nomination for Best Latin Jazz Album at last year's ceremony. As someone who's reviewed both records, *To Hear from There* is a better record than last year's nominated album and that says a lot. Wallace is a talented trombonist/composer and record label owner with a passion for Latin Jazz that is heartwarming.

9. *Family*- Jeff "Tain" Watts

If there's one group that jazz fans should see live, it's Watts' group (make sure pianist David Kikoski is part of that night's group). There are few drummers out today who can do what Watts can. He's been in the industry a long time, but he still sounds fresh. His recordings aren't always received very well, but it's not because of any shortcomings in the performances.

10. *The Mosaic Project*- Terri Lyne Carrington


As a female jazz writer, nothing thrills me more than seeing talented female musicians doing their thing. There is a great plethora of female vocalists, but the female musician has not been as prominent a fixture in jazz. Veteran drummer Terri Lyne Carrington managed to put together a female project with some of the best and most promising musicians on the scene today: Esperanza Spalding, Helen Sung, Tineke Postma, Patrice Rushen, Geri Allen, Mimi Jones, and Gretchen Parlato being just a few. Congrats to the women featured on *The Mosaic Project* not just for performing on a female jazz project, but for performing on a really good project that happens to feature all females.

11. *The Lost and Found*- Gretchen Parlato

And speaking of vocalists, no female vocalist has made a greater impact on jazz over the past couple of years than Gretchen Parlato. She's a musician's singer having performed on more than fifty recordings since her professional debut in 2005. The 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition winner has earned the respect and admiration of such luminaries as Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, and-- if she keeps making records like *The Lost and Found*-- she's sure to gain a following that exceeds what's possible even her wildest dreams.

If this list represents even a small portion of where jazz is headed, then 2012 is sure to be even better. Here's wishing you all a Happy New Year!

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