



JAZZ VOCAL ESSENTIALS

NO MUSICIAN IN THE JAZZ WORLD SEEMS TO CONNECT WITH LISTENERS AS VISCERALLY AS THE VOCALIST. WHILE SAXOPHONISTS COLEMAN HAWKINS AND JOHN COLTRANE COULD STIR DEEP EMOTIONS, AND PIANISTS BILL EVANS AND KEITH JARRETT COULD WRING TEARS FROM GRANITE, IT'S THE SINGERS WHO HAVE THE EASIEST ACCESS TO OUR HEARTS. MAYBE IT'S LYRICAL CONTENT, OR THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE HUMAN VOICE THAT DRAWS US IN. OR PERHAPS IT'S THE COMMONALITY THAT MOST OF US CAN MAKE SOUNDS, OR EVEN MUSIC, WITH NOTHING MORE THAN OUR VOCAL CORDS, WHETHER CROONING IN A LOVER'S EAR WHILE SLOW DANCING OR BELTING ONE OUT IN THE SHOWER. NO MATTER OUR DELUSIONS, FEW OF US CAN DELIVER THE SHIVERS OF AN ELLA FITZGERALD OR JOE WILLIAMS, OR REALLY ANY OF THE ARTISTS ON THE FOLLOWING LIST, WHICH — ALTHOUGH HIGHLY SUBJECTIVE AND POSSIBLY TOO SHORT BY HALF — SHOULD BE FOUNDATIONAL TO ANY JAZZ LOVER'S LIBRARY.

B Y B O B W E I N B E R G



DINAH WASHINGTON

Dinah Jams (EmArcy), 1955

A superb blues and ballad singer, Dinah Washington was equally adept at jazz, as she proved definitively on this live-in-the-studio recording. On standards such as “*Lover, Come Back to Me*,” “*I’ve Got You Under My Skin*” and “*You Go to My Head*,” she employed all the brassy brio at her command, her trumpet-like instrument sustaining notes and inventively phrasing like the remarkable musicians surrounding her. That A-list ensemble included saxophonist Harold Land, trumpeters Clifford Brown, Clark Terry and Maynard Ferguson, pianist Junior Mance and drummer Max Roach. The band has plenty of space to stretch, but never outshines the dynamic Ms. D — could anyone?



LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND ELLA FITZGERALD

Ella and Louis (Verve), 1957

Two of the most beloved voices in American music come together on a set of indelible jazz standards. Intimate, elegant and seemingly effortless, their renditions of songbook staples such as “*Can’t We Be Friends?*” “*Isn’t This a Lovely Day?*” and “*Cheek to Cheek*” are suffused with a genuine warmth of feeling, the contrast of Fitzgerald’s silk with Armstrong’s salt making for an irresistible combination. The trio of pianist Oscar Peterson, guitarist Herb Ellis and bassist Ray Brown, along with Armstrong’s own immediately identifiable trumpet sound, provide the perfect accompaniment.



BOB DOROUGH

Devil May Care (Bethlehem), 1957

Arkansas native Dorough’s wry, idiosyncratic phrasing and cornpone vocals combined to make him the most unlikely of jazz hipsters. His delivery on standards such as “*Polka Dots and Moonbeams*” and “*Midnight Sun*” revealed a daring bordering on irreverence, and his allegiance to bebop was made plain with his lyrics to “*Yardbird Suite*,” an affectionate ode to Charlie Parker. And while humor permeated tunes such as “*Baltimore Oriole*” and “*Johnny One Note*,” Dorough was no novelty act, his musicality coming through his tight arrangements for a small ensemble, excellent piano playing and deft use of “*vocalese*,” or recreating instrumental passages vocally and inserting lyrics into instrumental solos.



BILLIE HOLIDAY

Lady in Satin (Columbia), 1958

Recorded toward the end of her life, her voice ravaged by addiction and harrowing life experiences, *Lady in Satin* captures Holiday at her most achingly vulnerable. In front of an orchestra led by Ray Ellis, the once-girlish singer inhabits tunes such as “*I’m a Fool To Want You*,” “*You Don’t Know What Love Is*” and “*But Beautiful*” with startling intimacy. While plenty of collections of Lady Day in her prime showcase her excellence as one of jazz’s most gifted singers — and one more seemingly in control of her destiny, or at least able to fake it — *Lady in Satin* is a cry from the heart, revealing in the way that the best art always is.



JOE WILLIAMS/ LAMBERT, HENDRICKS & ROSS

Sing Along With Basie (Roulette), 1958

Vocal trio Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks and Annie Ross teamed up with the Basie band and its exuberant singer Joe Williams for a romp through the Count’s venerable songbook. LH&R’s signature vocalese, in which the trio mates take on the roles of various instrumentalists, adds new luster to swing classics such as “*Jumpin’ at the Woodside*,” “*Tickle Toe*” and “*Every Tub*.” Williams eases right into the mix, injecting humor and spirit into his reads of “*Going to Chicago Blues*” and “*Rusty Dusty Blues*.” Hendricks’ lyric-writing genius is also on full display.



JOHN COLTRANE AND JOHNNY HARTMAN

(Impulse), 1963

Coltrane’s exquisite taste is exemplified by his choice of plush-voiced crooner Hartman to join him on this glittering gem of an album. The saxophonist and the vocalist display a remarkable synergy, the opening trifecta of “*They Say It’s Wonderful*,” “*Dedicated to You*” and “*My One and Only Love*” comprising some of the most romantic music ever recorded. And their wistful, dramatic read of “*Lush Life*” sounds as if they had paged through Billy Strayhorn’s diary. Backed by pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones, Coltrane plays with a transcendent beauty that’s matched by Hartman’s velvety tone.



NINA SIMONE

In Concert (Philips), 1964

Even in front of a friendly New York crowd, it's hard to fathom the courage it must have taken for Simone to perform tunes such as "Old Jim Crow" and "Mississippi Goddam" when the ink on Civil Rights legislation was still damp. This remarkable trio concert — with bassist Lisle Atkinson, drummer Bobby Hamilton and Simone doubling on piano — also includes her stark and riveting read of "I Loves You, Porgy," an intense and dramatic "Pirate Jenny" and a devastating "Don't Smoke in Bed." And then there's "Mississippi Goddam," its righteous anger wrapped in a catchy melody and bouncy rhythm that hardly disguises Simone's disgust with the Deep South bigotry that ended the lives of Civil Rights workers and innocent children in a church basement. Black lives always mattered to Simone, even when it wasn't safe or prudent to say so.



EDDIE JEFFERSON

The Jazz Singer (Inner City), 1965

Vocalese pioneer Jefferson brought plenty of humorous bon homie to his razor-sharp interpretations of jazz classics — many of which were fairly recent when the singer added his lyrics on these 1959-61 sessions. He pointedly chided critics and squares with his read of Miles Davis' "So What?" ("Miles walked off the stage ... so what?!") and remonstrated/celebrated a slick lothario hipster with his take on Horace Silver's funky groover "Sister Sadie." Jefferson also sang his version of "Moody's Mood for Love," a hit for his contemporary King Pleasure and for which he had penned the lyrics, and tips a cap to Coleman Hawkins with a masterful "Body and Soul."



KING PLEASURE

The Source (Prestige), 1972

Like Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure (born Clarence Beeks) was an early adopter of vocalese. His 1952 recording of "Moody's Mood for Love," with Jefferson's lyric and featuring the charming Blossom Dearie, captivated listeners, while his "Parker's Mood" paid homage to Charlie Parker with sublime bluesiness. (Is there a more dramatic opening to a song than the vocal fanfare, "Come with meee/If you want to go to Kansas City"?) Betty Carter and Jon Hendricks join King on a couple of tunes in this collection, and A-list jazzers such as Lucky Thompson, John Lewis, Percy Heath and Kenny Clarke complement his engaging voice and winning way with words.



OSCAR BROWN JR.

Sin and Soul (Columbia), 1961

The debut recording of Chicago-born singer/poet/composer Brown is "all killer, no filler." With deep feeling and wit, he explored the African-American experience in mini-musical playlets that recalled African folk tales ("Signifyin' Monkey"), the slave-auction block ("Bid 'Em In") and the cry of the street peddler ("Rags and Old Iron"). Brown's brilliance is also revealed in lyrics he penned to jazz tunes such as Nat Adderley's "Work Song," Mongo Santamaria's "Afro Blue" and Bobby Timmons' "Dat Dere," the last a tender, humorous observation of a father-child relationship. By turns hilarious and profound, Brown's performances resound with affection and humanity.



ABBEY LINCOLN

Straight Ahead (Candid), 1961

Lincoln's bone-chilling vocals on Max Roach's *We Insist!* (1960) were prelude to her stunning emotional performance on *Straight Ahead*. With husband Roach on drums, and an all-star modern jazz complement including Eric Dolphy, Booker Little, Julian Priester and Mal Waldron, Lincoln sang with unfettered honesty about racial, social and economic injustice. The singer penned now-classic lyrics to "Blue Monk," her sublimely bluesy version featuring Coleman Hawkins on tenor sax, and elsewhere inhabits words penned by Billie Holiday and Langston Hughes. While the overall mood is bleak, Lincoln's is a voice of defiance, a kind of hope in itself.



JEANNE LEE AND RAN BLAKE

The Newest Sound Around (RCA/Victor), 1962

If vocalist Lee and pianist Blake sound particularly in sync on their debut recording, it's because the pair had been rehearsing — more often than gigging — for a few years when they went into the studio in late 1961. Repertoire included standards, blues and folk, all filtered through a shared modern-jazz sensibility and an inward-facing lens. By turns dreamy, dark and mysterious, tunes such as the noirish "Laura," the traditional "Where Flamingos Fly" and the spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" are refreshed by Lee's gorgeous tone and hornlike phrasing. Blake's spare, at times spiky, accompaniment added layers of psychological depth.



LEON THOMAS

Facets: The Legend of Leon Thomas
(Flying Dutchman), 1973

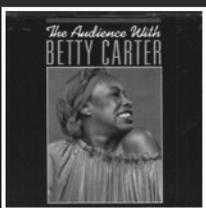
Singular baritone Thomas first broke through with his prayerful vocals and distinctive jazz yodel on Pharoah Sanders' "The Creator Has a Master Plan." Striking out on his own, he recorded for a few different labels, including Flying Dutchman, the imprint releasing this stellar collection. Thomas reprised "Creator" with a shorter, but still potent, version, featuring James Spaulding on alto sax and Lonnie Liston Smith on piano, and indeed showcased different "facets" of his artistry: a downhome-meets-uptown read of John Lee Hooker's "Boom-Boom-Boom"; a dip into Ellingtonian swing on "Duke's Place" (with Duke's guys behind him); and a poignant version of Horace Silver's "Song for My Father." Tunes such as "China Doll" and "Let the Rain Fall on Me" display still other aspects of the singer, who could temper exuberance with shiver-inducing sensitivity.



SARAH VAUGHAN

The Duke Ellington Songbook, Vol. 2 (Pablo), 1979

No longer a jewel-voiced ingenue, the supremely gifted Vaughan was in her mid-50s when she recorded a couple of albums of Ellington treasures. Her instrument had deepened since her heyday, but so had her interpretive abilities and adventurous spirit. On reads of "I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues" and "Rocks in My Bed," she conjures the woeful humor of the best blues practitioners, and her voice travels from deep-chested rumble to anguished cry with dramatic effect. Of course, Vaughan was still capable of dazzling beauty, as she bends notes to her will on a wordless "Chelsea Bridge" and winds up the program with a moving "Prelude to a Kiss." Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson ups the blues ante, playing alto sax and lending his hilarious vocals to "Rocks in My Bed."



BETTY CARTER

The Audience With Betty Carter (Bet-Car), 1980

Like Sarah Vaughan, Carter was an exceptional talent who underwent stylistic changes from bebop to R&B to a *sui-generis* kind of singing that was as daring and musical as any vocalist before or after. Also like Vaughan, she had to accommodate the deepening of her voice as she aged, although her delivery retained a coquettish quality. Carter stretches notes like taffy and scats with machine-gun rapidity on the live double album *The Audience With Betty Carter*. Side A encompasses one extraordinary 25-minute cut, as the singer flits and glides through her "Sounds (Moving On)," and takes time to introduce her sterling accompanists: pianist John Hicks, bassist Curtis Lundy and drummer Kenny Washington. Spontaneous composition and reinvention are hallmarks of Carter's artistry, and well in evidence on her emotionally rich reads of standards such as "Everything I Have Is

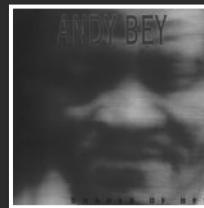
Yours," and she displays a great *joie de vivre* on the irresistible "Tight," her composition becoming something of a hip standard itself.



CARMEN MCRAE

Carmen Sings Monk (Novus), 1988

McRae, whose career stretched back to the 1940s, knew Thelonious Monk well, and her vocal interpretations of his music sound as natural as breathing. Utilizing lyrics from Jon Hendricks, Abbey Lincoln and Sally Swisher, McRae inhabited the music and world of Monk, as she injected plenty of attitude into classic numbers such as "Well You Needn't," "I Mean You" and "Monk's Dream," aided by an A-list quartet (saxophonist Clifford Jordan, pianist Eric Gunnison, bassist George Mraz and drummer Al Foster). Of course, she also brings terrific sensitivity to ballads such as "Pannonica" and "Ruby, My Dear," and word-oriented listeners may come away from the record with an even greater appreciation of Monk's music.



ANDY BEY

Shades of Bey (Evidence), 1998

A teen prodigy in the 1950s, and a much-sought sideman in the '60s and '70s, Bey has continued to find new textures in his remarkably flexible instrument. The Newark, New Jersey, native came to prominence once again in the mid-'90s, and has released a string of excellent recordings ever since. On *Shades of Bey*, the singer finds intimate, elegant expression in sparsely accompanied songs including the lovely "Like a Lover (O Cantador)" and a haunting read of Nick Drake's "River Man." He also returns to the Ellington/Strayhorn canon with an aching "Pretty Girls (The Starcrossed Lovers)" and an elegiac "The Last Light of Evening" (Strayhorn's "Blood Count," with a Dominique Eade lyric), stretching his basement baritone to feathery heights.



CHARLIE HADEN QUARTET WEST

The Art of the Song (Verve), 1999

Yes, bassist Haden sings on this record. No, that's not the primary reason we've included it here. Rather, it's the performances of vocalists Shirley Horn and Bill Henderson, at their intimate best out front of Haden's Quartet West and a chamber orchestra, that make this album essential. On a curated set of songs culled from stage and screen productions, Horn and Henderson invest each number with a depth of feeling and unique personality. You can feel the chill in Horn's desolate delivery of "Lonely Town" and the warm radiance she generates in "The Folks Who Live on the Hill." Henderson, too, celebrates the joys of romance over the long haul on "Why Did I Choose You" and "You My Love," his voice brimming with emotion. Haden's whispery take on "Wayfaring Stranger" caps the program and fits right in with the overall mood. ■