

TRIO ESSENTIALS

THERE'S AN ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLE THAT THE TRIANGLE IS THE STRONGEST SHAPE: THREE SIDES AND THREE ANGLES BEAR WEIGHT EVENLY, DISPERSING COMPRESSION, SHARING TENSION, TRANSFERRING FORCE. THE SAME CAN BE SAID FOR THE JAZZ TRIO. THERE'S SOMETHING MAGICAL THAT HAPPENS AS SOON AS COMPANY BECOMES A CROWD. TRIOS HAVE BEEN BEHIND SOME OF THE GREATEST RECORDINGS IN JAZZ. HERE ARE A FEW ALBUMS THAT STAND THE TEST OF TIME.

B Y B R I A N Z I M M E R M A N



BENNY GOODMAN TRIO

***After You've Gone: The Original Benny Goodman Trio and Quartet Sessions Vol. 1* (Bluebird), 1987**

During the 1930s and '40s, clarinetist Benny Goodman was one of the most popular figures in American music, earning the title — out front of his big band — as the “King of Swing.” But his trio with Teddy Wilson on piano and Gene Krupa on drums etched into wax a number of seminal recordings that set a new course for small-group interplay

and improvisation. Requisite track: “Body and Soul”



NAT KING COLE TRIO

***The Complete Capitol Recordings of The Nat King Cole Trio* (Mosaic), 1991**

Beloved jazz vocalist Nat “King” Cole began his career at the helm of a peerless trio featuring Oscar Moore on guitar and Wesley Prince on bass. On a handful of recordings pressed in Los Angeles during the '30s and '40s, Cole (also a remarkable pianist) and crew revealed new possibilities for what a trio could accomplish, especially with regard to the interaction

between vocals and guitar. Requisite track: “What’ll I Do?”

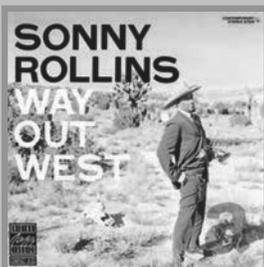


MARY LOU WILLIAMS TRIO

***Zodiac Suite* (Smithsonian Folkways), 1945**

During the course of her career, pianist Mary Lou Williams constructed a durable bridge between jazz and classical music. In 1945, with a trio comprising Al Lucas on bass and Jack Parker on drums, she recorded the *Zodiac Suite*, an original composition dedicated to fellow musicians born under each astrological sign. The results are heavenly. Requisite

track: “Taurus”



SONNY ROLLINS

***Way Out West* (Contemporary), 1957**

Despite its cheeky Old West nature — or maybe because of it? — Sonny Rollins’ *Way Out West* is a transcendent album that brims with profound musical ideas. It was the first of the saxophonist’s forays into the pianoless trio format, this one featuring Ray Brown on bass and Shelly Manne on drums. On a program of jazz standards, Rollins and crew make the harmonic possibilities seem endless. Requisite track: “I’m an Old Cowhand”



JIMMY SMITH

***Groovin' at Smalls' Paradise Volume 1* (Blue Note), 1957**

The organ trio — traditionally consisting of organ, drums and guitar — is an iconic sound in jazz, and few trios are as iconic as the ones helmed by Jimmy Smith. On *Groovin' at Smalls' Paradise Volume 1*, Smith serves up a showcase of soul alongside Eddie McFadden on guitar and Donald Bailey on drums. Indelibly funky. Requisite track: “The Champ”



AHMAD JAMAL TRIO

***At the Pershing: But Not for Me* (Argo), 1958**

Few pianists in jazz can match Ahmad Jamal's mastery of dynamics and phrasing. This live set, captured in 1958 at the Pershing Hotel in Chicago, swings with easy precision, showing us why Jamal remains one of the greatest musical storytellers in jazz. Bassist Israel Crosby and drummer Vernel Fournier are exemplary. Requisite track: "Poinciana"



THE JIMMY GIUFFRE 3

***Trav'lin' Light* (Atlantic), 1958**

Reedist Jimmy Giuffre was an early — if overlooked — adopter of free improvisation, espousing an innovative model for jazz that was liberated from the constraints of traditional chord structures and rhythms. His namesake trio would take many forms over the years, but this project — with valved trombonist Bob Brookmeyer and guitarist Jim Hall — is his most probing and ambitious. Requisite track: "Trav'lin' Light"



BILL EVANS TRIO

***Sunday at the Village Vanguard* (Riverside), 1961**

More than almost any other jazz artist, Bill Evans transformed the trio into a holistic unit, one in which three musicians speak with a single voice. To hear an Evans trio live, as on this 1961 set at New York's most famous jazz venue, is to hear his genius at work. Bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian rise to the occasion and then some. Requisite track: "Gloria's Step"



OSCAR PETERSON TRIO

***Night Train* (Verve), 1963**

A technically gifted musician with a poetic ear to match, Oscar Peterson was as eloquent a pianist as they come. He commanded several outstanding trios throughout his career, but the outfit featured on 1963's *Night Train* — with drummer Ed Thigpen and bassist Ray Brown — crafted a masterpiece. Requisite track: "Georgia on My Mind"



CHICK COREA

***Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* (Solid State/Blue Note), 1968**

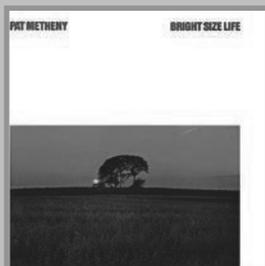
An undeniable current of joy runs through the hard-swinging *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* by the brilliant pianist Chick Corea. As with everything Corea did, there's a sense of discovery and adventure packed into every note. The album — with Roy Haynes on drums and Miroslav Vitous on bass — is among the brightest stars in the post bop trio universe. Requisite track: "Matrix"



TONY WILLIAMS LIFETIME

Emergency! (Polydor/PolyGram), 1969

Few ensembles in jazz compressed so much energy into so small a space as Tony Williams Lifetime. The group's debut album is pure fire from beginning to end. But would you expect anything less from a group featuring Williams on drums, John McLaughlin on guitar and Larry Young on organ? Not even the sun gets this hot. Requisite track: "Emergency"



PAT METHENY TRIO

Bright Size Life (ECM), 1976

Pat Metheny's debut album, released in 1976, introduced the world to a guitarist of extraordinary versatility and a musician of unfathomable melodic depth. His trio included a pair of likeminded trailblazers in drummer Bob Moses and bassist Jaco Pastorius. Requisite track: "Unquity Road"



AIR

Air Lore (Arista Novus), 1979

Consisting of reedist Henry Threadgill, bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Steve McCall — three visionary members of Chicago's freethinking Association for the Advancement of Creative Music — Air was a beacon of experimental jazz during the loft-scene era of the 1970s. Their album *Air Lore* filters compositions by Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton through an avant-garde prism. The past meets the future.

Requisite track: "King Porter Stomp"



GERI ALLEN

The Printmakers (Minor Music), 1984

The debut album by pianist Geri Allen was a major statement in the jazz trio form. It solidified her standing in what fellow pianist Matthew Shipp called the Black Mystery School, a cohort of iconoclastic musicians whose style defies easy imitation and academic codification. Allen, who died in 2017, is simply sublime on *The Printmakers*.

Drummer Andrew Cyrille and bassist Anthony Cox complete the

picture. Requisite track: "A Celebration of All Life"



KEITH JARRETT STANDARDS TRIO

Standards, Vol. 2 (ECM), 1985

The Keith Jarrett Standards Trio — comprising pianist Jarrett, bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette — contributed an innovative perspective on the Great American Songbook when they laid down the tracks that would become *Standards Vols. 1 and 2*. Improvisation and spontaneous composition are the guiding lights of this trio, which continued to work together for more than 20 years.

Requisite track: "If I Should Lose You"



MEESKI, MARTIN & WOOD

***Shack-man* (Rykodisc/Gramavision), 1996**

The progenitors of avant-groove are in peak form on *Shack-man*, their second studio album and a cult favorite for fans of jazz fusion. Adding to the album's mystique is the fact that it was recorded in a remote shack in Hawaii, with equipment powered solely by generators. Pure magic. Requisite track: "Jelly Belly"



BRAD MEHLDAU

***The Art of the Trio Vol. 3: Songs* (Warner Bros.), 1998**

Arguably the most resonant of Mehldau's Art of the Trio albums, *Songs* seeks to explore the qualities that make great compositions endure. Mehldau's improvisational vocabulary, while entirely his own, has influenced a generation of young pianists. Bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy share the vision. Requisite track: "Exit Music (For a Film)"



ESBJÖRN SVENSSON TRIO (E.S.T.)

***From Gagarin's Point of View* (Sony), 1999**

The Esbjörn Svensson Trio set the mold for progressive European piano trios, and their influence continues to resonate even after the untimely passing of pianist Svensson, the group's namesake and leader, in 2008. *From Gagarin's Point of View* was the first album released by the trio outside of their native Sweden, and most clearly captures their mind-warping blend of jazz, pop and alternative rock.

Requisite track: "From Gagarin's Point of View"



THE BAD PLUS

***These Are the Vistas* (Columbia), 2003**

Bristling originals. Covers of Nirvana, Blondie and Aphex Twin. The major-label debut by The Bad Plus ushered in a new era of trio playing, one that amplified the level of discourse both among its members and between genres of music. Requisite track: "Smells Like Teen Spirit" ■