

One critic's picks for best jazz and blues recordings of 2001

Michael G. Nastos
28 December 2001

The following list of jazz and blues recordings for 2001 has been submitted to the *WSWS* by Michael G. Nastos, who hosts "Evening Jazz & Blues" weeknights on WEMU-FM, 89.1, in Ypsilanti, Michigan as he has for 23 of his more than 30 years in radio. Nastos has written for the *Alchemist*, the *All Music Guide*, the *Ann Arbor News*, *Arts Midwest*, the *Blues Review*, *Cadence*, *Coda*, *Detroit Jazz*, *Downbeat*, *Jazz Journal International*, *Jazz Times*, the *Metro Times* and *Swing Journal* magazines and the *SEMJA* (Southeastern Michigan Jazz Association) *Update*. He is past Jazz Chair of the Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural Affairs, and edited author Robert Sweet's *Music Universe*, *Music Mind: A History Of The Creative Music Studio*.

Many people ask me toward the end of the year about the top jazz and blues albums of the year. Having had access to almost 3,000 CDs in 2001, I believe there were many worthwhile recordings this past year, regardless of style, in jazz, blues and world music. Therefore I submit this list of recommended CDs for buyers and listeners, as well as the industry at large. Within each category the recordings are listed in no particular order.

Last year I felt a little presumptuous simply presenting a list on the *WSWS*. I write under the assumption that most people reading this will have confidence I know what I'm talking about, with the caveat that you should too. Being a chronic namedropper, and believing that the best way to explain my choices is through including so-called "kernels" of knowledge, the idea of further illuminating my picks seemed a good suggestion.

I also think that the music business itself needs to be explained, at least from a jazz and blues perspective. With the downturn in the economy, larger companies are either chasing their own artistic tails, downsizing their rosters or, in the case of jazz, abandoning it. There has never been a moment in history like this, when as the major record companies concentrate only on the big names, independent labels are proliferating, if not flourishing. The result is a marketplace for music that is more fractured than ever, yet more diverse, and bloated with choices. Radio is not much help, television doesn't care at all and newspapers don't cover anything but the flavor of the week/month. Finding a CD store that might stock an interesting item is another story altogether. Shops that specialize in used or discounted CDs probably offer more selection, although it's a shame that those are the recordings someone, for whatever reason, did not want, or could not sell.

For those of you who seek the truth, who actually search for new music or artists and want to know more than the small amount *Billboard* magazine, "Entertainment Tonight," MTV or CNN might allow you to know, realize that this music is alive and well, even if the business itself suffers from perpetual constipation.

Top Ten Jazz CDs of 2001

1. "The Mose Chronicles, Vol. I"/Mose Allison (Blue Note)—The great jazz and blues amalgamator in a live setting can't be beat, as delightful a recording as you'll find in any style of music ... looking forward to Vol. II in 2002.

2. "Black Dahlia"/Bob Belden (Blue Note)—A dense orchestral tone poem session, à la Gil Evans, musically depicting the life and death of the famed Black Dahlia diva Elisabeth Short, murdered at age 22 in LA in 1947; this is the ultimate jazz concept album of the new millennium.

3. "Blythe Byte"/Arthur Blythe (Savant)—Alto saxophonist Blythe sounds as good as ever, a comeback of sorts from his glory days of the late '70s-early '80s; he's more modern than most, swinging with vibrant passion and fervor.

4. "Paraiso"/Caribbean Jazz Project (Concord Picante)—Some have deemed this smooth, more accurate to say disciplined, sweet, and musical beyond compare, with monster flute player Dave Valentin scaling the heights.

5. "Birds Of A Feather"/Roy Haynes (Dreyfus)—A definitive bop tribute by the drummer who powered Charlie Parker's band in the late '40s, helped by modern-day warriors Dave Holland—bass, Kenny Garrett—alto sax, Dave Kikoski—piano and Roy Hargrove—trumpet; probably my pick for overall Jazz CD Of 2001.

6. "Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez" (Nonesuch/World Circuit)—An intriguing Latin-jazz fusion from bassist Cachaito, nephew of Cachao, this CD broadens parameters while blowing minds, the best of its genre this year.

7. "Keep The Spirits Singing"/David Newman (High Note)—Saxophonist/(especially) flutist Newman's star rises even farther in his sixth decade of music-making with this definitive mainstream maximum jazz effort.

8. "Works For Me"/John Scofield (Verve)—The electric guitarist, with an all-star band, proves he has lots left in the tank in terms of presenting original, non-fusoid crossover music that chooses to sing instead of wail.

9. "On The Inside Looking In"/Dan Wall (Double-Time)—The oft-ignored Wall plays beautiful Hammond B-3, combining the elegance of Ahmad Jamal's piano stylings with the sidereal elementality of role model/hero Larry Young.

10. "Arts & Crafts"/Matt Wilson (Palmetto)—Drummer Wilson's best to date, a trio plus trumpet effort that spans the wide variety of original modern mainstream, post-bop and avant-garde traditions, fired by Wilson's witty rhythmic sense.

High Honorable Mention

1. "Everybody Wants To Go To Heaven"/New York Jazz Collective (Naxos)—This all-star band, featuring pianist Mike Nock and alto saxophonist Marty Ehrlich, touches on many aspects of the modern mainstream, with spontaneous outbursts that fit parameters rather than overpowering them.

2. "Radio Mundo"/Rumba Club (Palmetto)—Potent, simmering 10-piece Latin-jazz ensemble on their fourth recording, and they're getting better and better, with "Fortitude" perhaps the premier single track of the year in all its polyphonic/rhythmic glory.

3. "Promised Land"/Cedar Walton (High Note)—The veteran pianist/composer/bandleader is certainly a future, if not present-day Hall

of Famer, continuing to create watershed recordings that set the bar high, and stand the test of time, in this case with a quartet starring saxophonist/flutist Vincent Herring.

Big Band

1. “Ekapa Lodumo”/Abullah Ibrahim—NDR Big Band (Enja)—South African pianist + German Big Band = magic music.

2. “Unknown Soldiers”/Third Coast Jazz Orchestra (Sea Breeze)—Interesting modern jazz from lesser-knowns ... try it!

3. “Waking Life”(movie soundtrack)/Tosca Tango Orchestra (TVT)—The music is more intriguing than the flick, and which tango is not alluring and inviting?

Latin Jazz

1. “Alma De Santiago”/Jane Bunnett (Blue Note)—A departure for Bunnett, working with a saxophone ensemble ... and a stunning concept.

2. “Invitation”/Roberto Carcasses (Velas)—Young pianist makes an impressive debut deftly exploring Latin, jazz, and traditional music.

3. “Los Originales”/Cuban Masters (Pimienta)—Dangerous all-star band with Patato, Cachao, Chocolate and a dozen other artists we all should know, playing thrilling, authentic Afro-Cuban sounds, and offering a comprehensive history lesson.

4. “From Enchantment & Timba To Full Force Jazz”/Tony Perez (Pimienta)—Twenty-eight-year-old pianist, hand picked by Chucho Valdes to lead Irakere, forges his own path as an individualist, a great debut.

5. “Live & In Clave”/Bobby Sanabria (Arabesque)—Percussionist leads a sizzling big band through jazz and original Afro-Cuban material, the sound is huge, the band on fire and conguero Sanabria in his element.

World Music

1. “The Cactus Of Knowledge”/Rabih-Abou Khalil (Enja)—Oud player Khalil offers yet another unique vision of his type of East/West fusion cooking, one in a series of recorded beauts for Enja.

2. “Unity”/Avishai Cohen-International Vamp Band (Stretch/Concord)—Bassist Cohen plays mostly piano on this set of visionary music that includes influences from Africa, Cuba, Argentina, the US and his native Israel.

3. “Sao Vicente”/Cesaria Evora (Windham Hill)—Evora sings her Cape Verdean blues with a variety of special guests—Chucho Valdes, Totinho, Caetano Veloso and Bonnie Raitt—on perhaps her most commercial recording, but no less dignified.

4. “Cantando Um Samba”/Filo Machado (Malandro)—Brazilian guitarist/singer extending the popular traditions of his homeland in the style of Milton Nascimento, and he’s just getting relatively started in his burgeoning career.

5. “Blue Flame”/Simon Shaheen (Ark 21)—Arabian national (born in Galilee), playing oud and violin, offering a firebrand of mixed world music rivaling Hassan Hakmoun, and one feels he’s only scratching the surface.

Traditional/Early Period

1. “Just For Fun”/Chuck Hedges (Arbors)—Great Milwaukee clarinetist swings sweetly on magnum opus.

2. “Dear Louis”/Nicholas Payton (Verve)—Not just another Armstrong tribute from young trumpet star.

3. “Hot House”/Terry Waldo’s Gutbucket Syncopators (Delmark)—Overdue for recognition, Waldo’s Syncos get the job done.

Vocals/Male

1. “Girl Talk”/Ernie Andrews (High Note)—More on the mellow side for this bluesy West Coast veteran and unsung hero.

2. “Tuesdays In Chinatown”/Andy Bey (N-Coded/12th Street)—Ultimate mellow singer with another great recording in the past decade, he’s like fine old red wine.

3. “Links”/Mark Murphy (High Note)—Murphy’s best effort in a decade, check out the hilarious “In The Land Of Oo-Bla-Dee.”

Vocals/Female

1. “Sings Lady Day”/Etta Jones (High Note)—Posthumous release for Jones of Billie Holiday tunes.

2. “Conviction”/Roseanna Vitro (A)—Music of Bill Evans sung with fortitude and passion by a great lyric interpreter and singer.

3. “Come What May”/Paula West (Hi Horse)—Check this lady out, she’s got a tiger by the tail, backed by an all-star cast of masterful jazzmen.

Avant-Garde

1. “On The Run”/Fred Anderson (Delmark)—Chicago saxophonist now well-recognized as a leader and original long-form thinker ... it’s about time.

2. “Requiem For Jack Kirby”/Gregg Bendian’s Interzone (Atavistic)—Wild, fractured, action figure music from vibist/percussionist Bendian in tribute to comic book legend Kirby.

3. “Last Option”/Eight Bold Souls (Thrill Jockey)—A thrill a minute from this raucous, driven yet soulful ensemble led by saxophonist Ed Wilkerson.

4. “Talking Horns”/Malachi Thompson (Delmark)—Teamed with low-end horns for this, trumpeter Thompson is on a roll, making very good to great recordings consistently.

5. “Go Blue”/Blue Gene Tyranny (O.O.)—A collaboration between composer Tyranny & Steven Rush, with the University of Michigan Digital Music Ensemble, wonderful minimalist portraits rivaling Steve Reich.

Mainstream Jazz

1. “Something Unexpected”/Peter Martin (Max Jazz)—Burning quintet club date in St. Louis for the young pianist, the cut “La Pregunta” is the best single track of 2001.

2. “Seventeen”/Mark Soskin (TCB)—Sleeper CD from pianist Soskin, who spent nearly 20 years with Sonny Rollins, and apparently stockpiled great modern jazz compositions.

3. “Byron ... Get One Free”/Byron Stripling (Nagel Heyer)—Brash trumpet star from the Basie band unleashing his own identity on a very tuneful, listenable program.

Jazz Fusion

1. “The Sound Of Surprise”/Bill Bruford’s Earthworks (DGM)—Drummer Bruford is swinging more, bashing less, and delving into more music than pyrotechnics, a good thing.

2. “Conjunction”/Mike Clark-Paul Jackson-Marc Wagon (Buckyball)—Interesting combination of drummer Clark (ex-Headhunters), jazz-rock-soul veteran bassist Jackson and emerging vibist Wagon.

3. “Soul Insider”/Bill Evans (ESC)—Saxophonist Evans way overdue for an excellent recording, this is it, and it’s rhythmically diverse.

Honorable Mention/New Releases

1. “Short Stories”/Peck Allmond (Spirit Nectar)—Younger brass & reed man with many original modern ideas.

2. “The Art Of Jazz Piano”/Joe Bonner (Black Orchid)—Solo piano, at times synth overdubbed, from neglected genius.

3. “Live @ Sweet Basil”/Cecil Brooks III (Savant)—Drummer with a quintet setting off fireworks throughout.

4. “Modern Man”/Bobby Broom (Delmark)—Chi-town guitarist with baritone saxophonist Ronnie Cuber and organist Dr. Lonnie Smith can’t be beat on this original offering, and breakthrough recording for Broom.

5. “Jazzpar 2000 Quintet”/Carsten Dahl (Storyville)—Euro-pianist Dahl with a larger ECM-ish ensemble ... a gem.

6. “Movin’ On”/Claire Daly (Koch)—Emerging baritone saxophonist swings mightily or sweetly, never bitter or brash.

7. “Song”/Marty Ehrlich (Enja)—Ehrlich’s a brilliant modern alto saxophonist ... ’nuff said.

8. “City Of Dreams”/Garrison Fewell (Splasc(h))—A sleeper for guitarist Fewell, with an all-star rhythm section and Italian saxophonist Tino Tricanna.

9. “Not For Nothin’”/Dave Holland (ECM)—Follow-up to two extraordinary CDs is just a shade below, but not much more.

10. “Thoughts Of You”/ Mary Ann McSweeney (Jazz Magnet)—East Coast bassist provides a sleeper with a small ensemble and original music ... seek this.

Top Ten Blues

1. “Homewreckin’ Done Live”/Mel Brown (Electro-Fi)—Brown’s standard fare of classic blues sits well.

2. “Make It Rain”/Michael Burks (Alligator)—Albert King-style guitarist plays funky originals.

3. “Plays Chicago Blues”/Henry Gray (Hightone)—Great piano veteran overdue for some recognition.

4. “That’s Right!”/Dennis Gruenling (Back Bender)—New Jersey hot-shot harmonicist jumps and swings.

5. “Wicked Grin”/John Hammond (Pointblank)—Music of Tom Waits interpreted by ever relevant Hammond.

6. “Lucky Charm”/Matt “Guitar” Murphy (Roesch)—Best-to-date recording from real life Blues Brother.

7. “Driftin’”/Louisiana Red (Earwig)—Red’s latest efforts have been solid, so’s this.

8. “Love Without Trust”/Ken Saydak (Delmark)—Another shade below recording from past efforts, still very worthwhile.

9. “Keep The Blues Alive”/Sam Taylor (Bluzman)—Interesting concept, with violinist Heather Hardy who recalls Don “Sugarcane” Harris and Papa John Creach.

10. “Wake Up Call”/Michelle Willson (Bullseye)—Nasty girl refining her efforts to swing harder and dig deeper.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact