

# Favorite jazz recordings of 2011

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Devising a list of the most interesting jazz released in 2011 is a somewhat easier proposition than coming up with a list of meaningful, worthwhile pop or rock music, but there are difficulties in jazz as well.

One finds an academic quality in the music of many of today's performers. There are soloists who attempt to impress audiences with technique, executing furious runs through scales with no logic or feeling to their phrasing. This is the music of individuals who have mastered the grammar of their language, but can think of nothing to say with it.

Today there are too few substantial works and even many of the better performers plow too narrow a field, but neither is contemporary jazz a wasteland. There are serious and intelligent works to be found.

The artists and albums listed below are certainly not above criticism. One can find weaknesses or missteps along with the more meaningful and exciting moments, but these works seem to me to be among the most rewarding jazz releases this year.

I found Israeli-born bassist, composer and bandleader Omer Avital's *Free Forever*, recorded during an electrifying performance in Italy, a wonderful blend of the musical traditions of North Africa, the Middle East and classic American jazz. One can sense, in both compositions and performance, a deeply felt desire to break through the arbitrary limitations of national and ethnic boundaries and traditions. There are democratic and genuinely humane impulses at work in the music.

The long, mournful trumpet solo by Ambrose Akinmusire on "Regret (No More)," from his album *When the Heart Emerges Glistening*, is among the more beautiful I've heard in recent memory. There are moments when Akinmusire's horn seems to actually weep in a human voice. It is a performance rich in emotion, played by a musician with a thoughtfully

developed, personal tone on his instrument and a serious approach to phrasing. Akinmusire, in his finer moments, tells us a story when he plays.

There are a number of other moments and musical qualities to admire. One might mention the tense, well-constructed solo by Jeremy Pelt on "David and Goliath," from his album *The Talented Mr. Pelt*; the uncommon warmth with which South African composer Abdullah Ibrahim writes for horns; the tenderness of "Ruby, My Dear" as played by pianist Eric Reed on *The Dancing Monk*, his tribute to the great composer and pianist Thelonious Monk; the lively, sensitive playing of two veteran alto saxophonists, Phil Woods and Lee Konitz, both in their 80s now. And there are others.

All in all, these were my favorite jazz recordings of 2011:

*Free Forever*—Omer Avital  
*Woods & Mays*—Phil Woods and Bill Mays  
*Live at Birdland*—Lee Kontitz/Brad Mehldau/Charlie Haden/Paul Motian  
*Sotho Blue*—Abdullah Ibrahim & Ekaya  
*Victory!*—J.D. Allen Trio  
*Unsung Heroes*—Brian Lynch  
*When the Heart Emerges Glistening*—Ambrose Akinmusire  
*The Dancing Monk*—Eric Reed  
*This Side of Strayhorn*—Terell Stafford  
*The Talented Mr. Pelt*—Jeremy Pelt



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