

1999's Best CDs

Last year at this time, I made up a list of those CDs that had made the biggest impression on me in the previous year. I e-mailed it out to a couple of friends, who were motivated to respond in kind. The result was several lists that really turned me on to some great music that I would've missed if I hadn't done this. So, (ta-daahhh), here we go again. This year, I'm expanding the list of people I'm sending it to, including more of you who I think have interesting ideas and opinions on this stuff. If you don't give a squat about my 'umble opinions, trash it. But I hope I piss you off enough to make you come up with your OWN list to bother me and everyone else with! These are CD releases, not necessarily released in 1999, but those that spent the most time on the disc player and had the biggest influence on me as a musician in the past year:

Duke Ellington - "The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (1927-1973)". This is definitely my #1 release of the year. 24 discs filled with some of the most creative and user-friendly music of the 20th Century, composed and conducted by a genuine genius using a hand-picked group of distinctive and inventive sidemen who remained fairly constant, at the leader's beck and call on a daily basis for decades! Will any musician ever have such an ideal setup again? This comes with an incredible album-sized booklet packed with info that should be a model for any project like this, and should put such packaging abortions such as "The Complete Bill Evans on Verve" into the toilet where they belong. It's comforting to know that if the Alpha Centurions ever come up to me and demand a reason why humanity should be spared annihilation, all I'd have to do is hand over this box.

And, the rest of my top 10 in no particular order:

King Crimson - "On Broadway, 1995"

ProjeKct Four - "ProjeKct Four: Live In San Francisco/ The Roar of P4". These two are released through a subscription-only "collector's club" that King Crimson runs. Crimson, currently on hiatus, splinters into small touring groups that explore methods and musical possibilities outside of the Crimson name, with the idea that when they re-unite (next year, according to plan) they bring in what they've learned and take it to the next level. "On Broadway" documents their last tour's apogee using a double-guitar-trio format, and the ProjeKct Four disc shows you what they're up to in their latest explorations. For me, this is the only working rock band that truly matters any more, and these discs are my Exhibit "A" to prove it.

Carla Bley - "Fancy Chamber Music". Her warped sensibility is turned to a classical-styled chamber orchestra. Unique and haunting.

Lydia Kavina - "Music from the Ether: Original Works for Theramin". For some reason, the theramin is in a creative revival, led by the video on Leon Theramin from some years back, and by Bob Moog's obsessive work with his company Big Briar. Here's the fruits of his labors.

Jon Hassell - "Fascinoma". Trumpet playing from Mars, produced by Ry Cooder and accompanied by a sideline of extremely delicate players, here's reinterpretations of some standards unlike anything before.

The Art of Noise - "The Seduction of Claude Debussy". Debussy meets sampling, hip-hop, movie music, and what else? It moves your feet and stretches your head all at once.

Wendy Carlos - "Clockwork Orange - Complete Original Score". This music, created back in 1971, for the most part went ignored by Stanley Kubrick after he became over-enamored with his temp tracks for the movie. You don't have to make allowances for the electronic music technology available in '71 with this -- it's great stuff in any age, and includes the touchstone work "Timesteps", long unavailable.

The Mahavishnu Orchestra - "The Lost Trident Sessions". This was Mahavishnu's 3rd studio album, recorded after "Birds of Fire", and forgotten about for 25 years after the participants melted down in a haze of bitchy and tactless confrontations. Listen and be amazed that at one time, corporate America supported music this exploratory!

Nigel Kennedy - "The Kennedy Experience". Wow! At last, evidence that the old farts that rule the classical world and have clamped the lid on accepting anything outside of their narrow jurisdiction are dying off and being replaced by a new generation of musicians that are stylistically blind, immensely capable, and creatively and artistically SMOKIN'! The music of Jimi Hendrix gets reworked in a whole new way, for acoustic ensemble, and doesn't lose an ounce of its adventure and fire. More!!

And here, in no particular order, are the runners-up, stuff I really liked but were elbowed out of a "Top 10" list:

Herbie Hancock - "The Complete Blue Note Sixties Sessions"

Chick Corea & Origin - "A Week at the Blue Note"

Miles Davis - "The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions"

XTC - "Apple Venus, Part One"

Jeff Beck - "Who Else!"
Scott Henderson, Gary Willis, & Tribal Tech - "Thick"
Dave Holland Quintet - "Points of View"
David Sylvian - "Dead Bees On a Cake"
Brian Wilson - "Imagination"
Robert Palmer - "Rhythm & Blues"
London Sinfonietta, Oliver Knussen - "Takemitsu: Quotation of Dream"
Fairport Convention - "Meet On the Ledge: The Classic Years (1967-1975)"
Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band - "The Dust Blows Forward"
Astor Piazzolla - "The Central Park Concert"

And, lastly, here's a short list of releases that I expected great things from. Didn't happen.

The Band - "Jubilation" . When Paul Jost e-mailed some of us that he had a tune appearing as the lead-off track on this album, I cheered. Sorry, Paul, wish the album was as good as your song. Plodding, clichéd, The Band deserved a better fate than they got; Richard Manuel's suicide was a blow they never recovered from, and Rick Danko's death last week makes this last release even more disappointing. Oh well.

Herbie Hancock - "Gershwin's World". Herbie - give up the concept albums. Give up the friggin' DJ/record scratching. Give up trying to be hip. Sit in the corner and play the piano like you do so well (refer to the Blue Note set above). I love to see musicians exploring new possibilities, but only when they do it well. Maybe you should get out of LA for a while?

Miles Davis/ Various DJ's - "Panthalassa: The Remixes". If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Marvin Gaye and various artists - "Marvin Is 60". One CD is a compilation of Marvin's best, but we've heard it before. This disc is contrasted with a companion disc of music biz wannabes doing inferior versions of the exact same tunes. Do we really need this? Are they that hard up for Grammys?

Ginger Baker Trio - "Going Back Home". Despite the best attempts by Bill Frisell and Charlie Haden, this dies. I WANT to say Ginger Baker is great, but I find it hard to believe that anyone can stay at home and practice and study African rhythms, etc. for 30 years and show such little growth. What were you REALLY doing, Ginger?

STEVE CARL:

Hey guys, here's my list, in no order, for anyone who cares:

Corea. Concerto - Chick with Origin and the London Philharmonic Orchestra playing "Spain" and his 1st piano concerto.

Bill Frisell - "Good Dog, Happy Man" - This guy's so off the wall, you got to love him. Plus, his version of "Shenandoah" with Ry Cooder, dedicated to Johnny Smith, is very haunting.

Paul Gailbraith - "Plays Haydn" - 8 string classical guitar played in cello position. Great stuff. I saw him at the Bach festival in Philly this year - awesome!

Jim Hall & Pat Metheny - That old fart (Jim Hall) sounds good no matter who he's playing with (cf. "The Bridge" or "Undercurrent").

The Kennedy Experience - Dave said it all.

Kronos Quartet - "At the Grave of Richard Wagner" - music of Liszt, Berg and Webern. Nice and dark.

Yefim Bronfman - Shostakovich Piano Concertos 1 and 2, Piano Quintet with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the LA Philharmonic. I saw the Classical Soloists Orchestra do this (#1) a couple of months ago. The next day I got an email from CDNow that advertised this disc. I'd never heard any of Dmitri's piano concertos before (lots of solo piano stuff), and this just blew me away.

Andy Summers - "Green Chimneys - The Music of Thelonious Monk" - I just love this guy's playing. And you can't argue with the material!

Shin-ichi Fukuda - "In Memorium Takemitsu: Guitar Works" - beautiful, especially the arrangements of Beatles tunes for classical guitar.

John McLaughlin - "Remember Shakti" - Shakti with electric guitar and flute sounds just as good as ever. I saw these guys in concert earlier this year (the flute was replaced by

an electric mandolin) and have to say it was one of the best concerts I've ever experienced (second only to Sonny Rollins).

Avoid these like the plague:

John Williams plays the movies - pure muzak. In my opinion, John Williams is the greatest guitarist to ever walk this planet, but this CD is shit.

Frank Vignola - "Deja Vu" - this guy's a great guitarist, in Jimmy Bruno's league. When I saw the material on this CD, "White Room", "Walkin' on the Moon", "Imagine", etc., I thought we'd finally get to hear a traditional player blow through some more modern material. Well, it blows, alright. Smooth jazz without integrity. I first listened to it in my car, and I was tempted to through it out the window.

fave cds of 1999

Like our compatriot **Dave Hartl**, I'm sending this out in the hopes that you'll respond in kind. I feel a bit isolated here in Hooterville and am always looking for input. These are discs that spent the most time in my disc player because I enjoyed them or because I was compelled to listen repeatedly. In no particular order...

Apple Venus Volume 1: XTC: While XTC can no longer be defined as a working rock band, I think they are producing some of the best pop music ever made.

Quintet 1965-1968: Miles Davis: Hartl copped this for me last spring (thanks Dog!) and it stayed in my disc player through the summer.

idlewild south: Allman Brother's band (remastered): I have vivid memories of the first time I heard this record on a late night broadcast from WMMR. Waves of nostalgia.

Black Loam/Mash Variations: Steve Hayden: Eccentric guitar playing/composing from one of my favorite eccentrics. Send him an email (sphayden@worldnet.att.net) and he'll probably send you a disc.

10 cent wings: Jonatha Brooke: Though currently out of fashion, singer-songwriters are still out there producing records. Here's one of the best I've heard in years.

Läther: Frank Zappa: I know it's been available for years but I just got it this summer past. Some of my favorite Zappa music

The Complete Blue Note Recordings: Thelonius Monk: I just love this stuff.

The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions: Miles Davis: Still mindblowing stuff. Columbia has been doing a great job with these reissues.

The Gilded Palace of Sin: The Flying Burrito Brothers: One of my favorite records finally made available on CD. Big fun.

A Sandole Trilogy: The Dennis Sandole Project: The guitar quartet is what you'd expect. The real treats

here are the music that wasn't written for guitar.