

So here we go again with the annual lineup of what was the most influential albums of the year, this time 2003. This started off years ago as a correspondence with George Tucker, and this is the first year he's not around to respond; therefore, anyone who gets this list is encouraged to come up with their own to make up the slack. I've been turned on to some great CDs I would have missed otherwise by this list, so let me know what you thought was hot in 2003 even if it wasn't released this past year.

It was the first year that I feel that we weren't scraping the bottom of the barrel to find worthy entries. There was actually a lot of interesting music made in 2003 and for the first time in years the new productions outnumber the vintage repackagings, so things are definitely looking up. Here's my **Top 10 Most Influential CDs of 2003**, in rough order of importance:

Alegria Wayne Shorter

Wayne is back, and this CD is just the latest in a long, long string of great releases. The commercial marketing of new jazz has been a source of despair for me for some time. How a classic like this got through a major label release with a budget to do it right is beyond me, but I'm glad for it.

The Power To Believe King Crimson

I saw these guys (a quartet again) at the Tower Theater the week this was released and the place was half full. Granted, Springsteen was doing a concert in A.C. that night, but it made me wonder why more people aren't dialed into these guys. Absolutely amazing, and it seems like some of their stuff is on my list every year. Dangerous Curves is up there with their best.

Wide Angles Michael Brecker Quintet

Wow, another great well-funded project from a major jazz label? What's going on here? I always like Brecker, and I think this is a project he got a chance to do since he played ball with the beancounters last year for the execrable Nearness of You: The Ballad Book CD and wanted a payoff of some real music. Some people carp that no one else gets any solo time on this. Fuck 'em, let 'em get their own contract and pay their own dues, Brecker writes and plays his ass off here and deserves success and encouragement for more like this.

I Can't Stop Al Green

I got this sucker cranked as I write this, and it's the most honest, soulful R&B album I've heard this decade. Al Green goes to the Royal Studios and hooks up with his old producer Willie Mitchell to pick up where he left off before his current jit-target nailed him with a pot of hot grits and gave him religion back in the '70's. This, more than anything else this year, is the release that makes me wish Tucker was still alive, he would've LOVED this!

Live At Lehigh University, 4/5/03 Wayne Shorter Quartet

OK, I'm a scumbag. I snuck a DAT recorder into the concert at Lehigh, sat dead center in the front row of the balcony and am glad I did. Wayne's group is up there with the classic groups of Miles and Trane in concept, and every single time they get together should be recorded for future generations, and that's it. I got a CD-R that is stunning and I'll never regret defying the record companies' incessant whining about bootlegging. They ain't doing the job getting enough of this stuff out there, so fuck 'em, too.

The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions Miles Davis

John McLaughlin is the god of guitar, and here's the proof of how incandescent he was as a young unknown. He owns this music, Miles was just steering. Also, a fascinating look at the genius of Teo Macero and how he took the raw tracks and crafted the final release from them. Extremely well-documented and very complete, every box set should be this good.

Live, Volume 1: Knitting Factory, 1989 John Zorn & Naked City

Jaco Pastorius's concept of Punk Jazz brought to its fullest flower. Screaming white-noise grooves morphing into Hollywood themes, electric jazz at high volume screaming out a bad attitude. Listen to this and be amazed at the breadth and street smarts of this legendary group. Frisell was never as good as this again. And man, can they turn on a dime and switch grooves and mood in an instant. Unbelievable live performance.

Everything Must Go Steely Dan

Alright, I'm starting to believe in them again. They're putting aside their anal-retentive production in favor of working with a Band, and the music improves because of it. "Godwhacker" should be song of the year.

Martin Scorsese Presents: The Blues Various Artists

If you have a lot of blues in your shelves this is redundant, but for those of us who like a smaller taste of the real thang, this will do nicely. A 5-CD box set with a taste of more blues sub-genres than I suspected ever existed. This goes from the old turn-of-the-20th-Century field hollers to Keb 'Mo, and really gets the best of the best. If someone who knows nothing about the blues wants to know what's great about them, this is what you give them. Period.

Perceptual Brian Blade Fellowship

Already out of print. Figures. Wayne Shorter's current drummer shows he's much more than a drummer. This even has Joni Mitchell guest-starring, and the concept is

much more than jazz. A hidden treasure, this is definitely a band deserving wider recognition. New York cats playing for the sheer hell of it. Truly beautiful music, well-played and soulfully presented.

And then in the last 3 weeks of 2003 a disc came out of nowhere and forced me to include it in the Top Ten, making it a Top Eleven this year since I can't bring myself to weed anything out:

Thieves And Poets John McLaughlin

McLaughlin writes a suite for guitar and orchestra over several years and records it beautifully, then adds on four standards recorded with his acoustic quintet. Really just a stunningly beautiful set of music, and one that I think is going to keep on influencing me through 2004.

*****Here's the **runner-ups** that also spent a lot of time in the CD player, and the only reason they're not listed above is that it was an exceptionally good year, I guess:

Mambo Sinuendo Ry Cooder & Manuel Galban

Cooder revisits a contact made with Buena Vista Social Club, the Cuban guitarist who once was musical director for Los Zafiros, a doo-wop crossover band that achieved international fame at the height of Beatlemania. My thanks to Ted & Turk Singer for making the connection on this one.

About Time Steve Winwood

Winwood cranks up the B3 and puts a regular band together again. He's always been one of my favorites but occasionally seems to wander off track. Well, he's back on again.

Live and Unreleased Weather Report

Finally, a double-disc of the best fusion group of the '70's cranking it out on the road. Listen to Jaco on this and you'll know why one of 2003's disappointments is listed below. Smoking jams from a style everyone's afraid to play.

Live Trane: The European Tours John Coltrane

A box set of live Coltrane? What, another? Yeah, and they can keep coming out as far as I'm concerned. Did he ever have a bad night?

In Person Friday and Saturday Nights

At the Blackhawk, Complete Miles Davis

This one blindsided me. I'd heard most of it years ago, but somehow couldn't hear how good it really was. Sometimes the sum is greater than the parts?

A Love Supreme (Deluxe Edition)

John Coltrane

One of the three best jazz albums gets the deluxe treatment, including a second disc that features the only live performance of this seminal work along with second takes and other goodies.

Disappointments:

Word of Mouth Revisited

Jaco Pastorius Big Band

Wherein the influence of Jaco is exposed by a group of bass players featured on Jaco compositions. So why is this so flat? Jaco was a tightrope walker, always making you feel like he was skirting the edge and liable to fall into humiliation any moment; by contrast, there's not a chancy second on this disc. They got the chops, they just don't have the attitude.

Rendezvous in New York

Chick Corea

Chick's 60th birthday party was a multi-group, multi-week NYC extravaganza. So how come we get all this Bobby McFerrin and one lousy cut of the Three Quartets band? Surely there were better selections to be had. Maybe not.

The Complete Miles Davis at

Montreux(1974-1991)

Miles Davis

A 20-CD box set chronicling Miles's weakest bands (for the most part - Disc One is the great 1975 Pete Cosey group). If you really want to hear a dozen different versions of Miles playing Cindy Lauper's Time After Time, you found the right set. I've loved every box set of Miles that's come out, but this one is really too complete for even the biggest Miles freak.

*******Best DVDs:**

Growing Up Live - Peter Gabriel. The most amazingly produced live rock show I've ever seen is done justice with a beautifully produced DVD. If only he didn't look like Ira Einhorn.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (Criterion Collection) Johnny Depp channels Hunter S.

Thompson and gets the VIP treatment in this two-disc set that contains a lot of great gonzo extras in addition to Terry Gilliam's visionary interpretation of this unfilmable book.

Baby Snakes - Frank Zappa's 1979 bizarro film gets a DVD release and lets a new generation see what a great well-rehearsed live band really sounds like as they push they edge. And the claymation is some of the wildest imagery ever put to film. A high tolerance for horseplay with sex dolls is recommended before viewing. It is subtitled "A Movie About

People Who Do Stuff That Is Not Normal".

The Miles Davis Story - This is how historical musical movies should be presented. Excellent cover of every phase of Miles's career, a must-see for any jazz musician alive.

