

The Mix

[by Rhapsody Editorial](#)

The Top 25 Jazz Records of 2011

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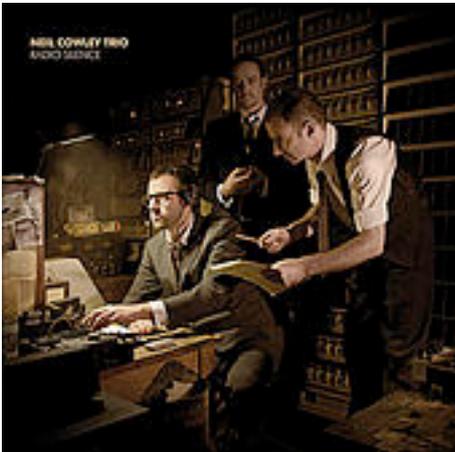
Maybe 2011 was the year of the vibraphone. Or the year of the piano trio. Or the year of Brad Mehldau or Paul Motian. Or another year of Miles. The best jazz records of 2011 are a varied bunch, but there are certain strains that float through the year's favorite recordings. The sheer diversity and strength of the offerings prove that the genre continues to expand boundaries with creativity, vision and bold sonic experiments.

The most exciting trend might be the sudden maturation of a cadre of young vibraphone players -- Warren Wolf, Stefon Harris, Jason Adasiewicz -- who all led or had a hand in fantastic records. Elder jazz vibist Gary Burton's new group also put forth one of the year's best albums, and helped make the vibraphone one of the hippest sounds in contemporary jazz. It was an excellent year for the genre's fringes and fusions, with the saxophones of Steve Coleman and Colin Stetson and Iraqi composer Amir ElSaffar. Then there's pianist Brad Mehldau. Of his *three* records in 2011, two on the list demonstrate why he's among the most distinct players around: an elegant, unrehearsed live session at Birdland with Charlie Haden, Lee Konitz and Paul Motian, and an electrifying solo session that bristles with his head-spinning technique.

Strains of Mehldau are also heard in the crowning offering from Swiss pianist Colin Vallon, whose trio turned out the top record of the year, *Rruga*. The

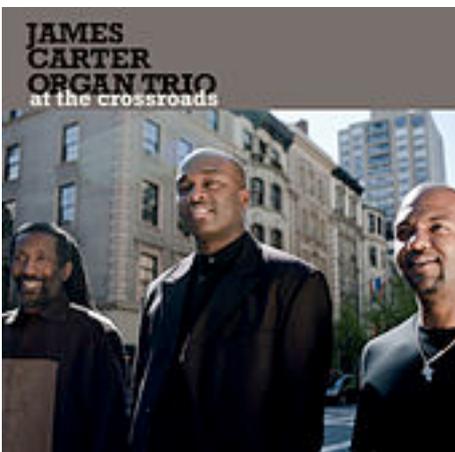
record's title is Albanian for "path," and it, like many other favorites of the year, is a wildly gratifying journey.

In addition to the albums below, be sure to check out my [🎵 Best in Jazz: 2011](#) playlist.



**25. [Neil Cowley Trio](#)
[Radio Silence](#)**

Although the Neil Cowley Trio may not have wide name recognition, they're the musical engine behind pop super-sensation Adele. A self-assured effort based around chunky melodic riffs and hard grooves, *Radio Silence* has more in common with the rock-oriented grooves of The Bad Plus than the piano-trio brilliance of Brad Mehldau. "Monoface" opens the album with an explosive bang, and its heavy backbeat and hook motif extend throughout. [Nate Cavaliere]



**24. [James Carter Organ Trio](#)
[At the Crossroads](#)**

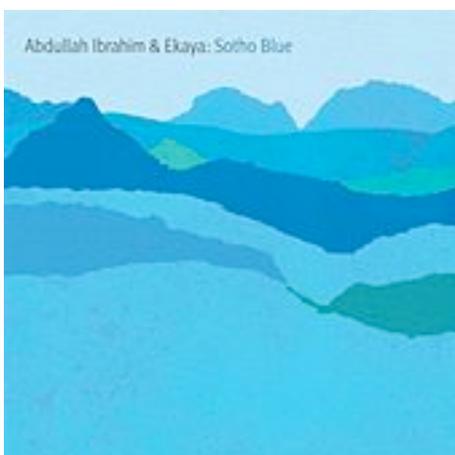
Although label troubles hindered James Carter's rise through the late '90s, the Detroit saxophonist has slowly put things back together. His second record of 2011, this gritty homage to the then-and-now of jazz in the Motor City, opens with a blistering take on "Oh Gee" and explores blues roots with a funky, gutsy, post-bop landscape. Although there are notable guest appearances -- including guitarist Bruce Edwards -- the standout track is from the hand of drummer Leonard King, Jr., who complements Carter's shrieking, virtuosic choruses on "Lettuce Toss Yo' Salad." [N.C.]



23. Anthony Wilson

Campo Belo

Guitarist and composer Anthony Wilson was a longtime sideman of Diana Krall, but he steps out of the vocalist's shadow with this effort, where he leads a band of young Brazilian players. Recorded in Sao Paulo, *Campo Belo* has a freewheeling, spontaneous feel to it. André Mehmari, on piano and clarinet, nearly steals the show and is always following a breath behind Wilson's clean lines with fantastic musicality. On "After the Flood," Wilson really sinks in and nearly evokes Grant Green. [N.C.]



22. Abdullah Ibrahim

Sotho Blue

There's a certain slyness in the stride of this collection of funky, meticulously arranged tunes from South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim. Everything here is a work of pristine taste and musical restraint: the short and concise choruses on "Calypso Minor," the melodic depth of backing flute lines on "The Mountain," the dense voicing of saxophones that opens "Nisa." This stellar collection borrows generously from '70s soul jazz and Gil Evans' school of harmony, and it's 2011's best jazz offering from a midsized ensemble. [N.C.]



21. Sir Roland Hanna **Colors from a Giant's Kit**

There are few better snapshots of the late Sir Roland Hanna's exuberant playing and musical eloquence than the mercurial title track and opener to this solo piano set. Two of his tunes, "A Story, Often Told But Seldom Seen" and "20th Century Rag" (possibly the record's highlight), show his inventiveness and sensitivity as a composer, while takes on such well-worn standards as Ray Noble's "Cherokee" and Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" flaunt his power as an arranger. But what shines through the whole package is the pure energy of Hanna's breathless solo lines and hammering basslines. [N.C.]



20. Christian McBride ***That Good Feeling***

Apparently Christian McBride long dreamed of making a big band record, and this rich, wide-ranging large-ensemble recording sounds like the product of long study. "The Shade of the Cedar Tree," originally on his Verve debut, and "Science Fiction," from his 2000 release, both get dense retooling. McBride's artfully educated arrangements -- from straight-up Basie-esque swing to challenging modernism -- have such breadth that sometimes it feels a bit too much like a scholastic exercise. However, the tunes in which he calls in his wife, vocalist Melissa Walker, are the record's most refined. [N.C.]



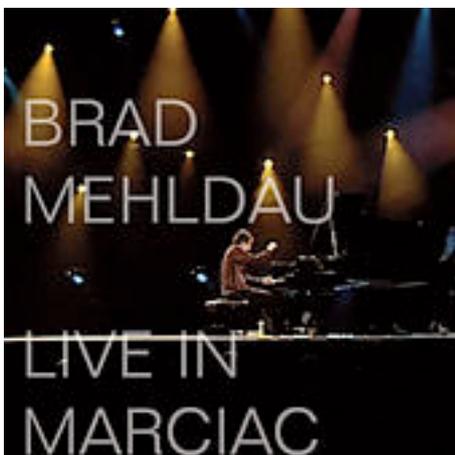
19. John Coltrane ***The Impulse! Albums: Volume Five***

When Coltrane died in 1967, Impulse! held an abundance of unreleased Coltrane sessions. The fifth in their "Originals" series compiles material that was all posthumously released: *Live in Seattle*, *Sun Ship*, *Transition*, *Infinity* and *Live in Japan*. Altogether, this is not the easiest set to listen to -- Coltrane is edgy, aggressive and abstract, and the fourth, controversial LP features dubious posthumous orchestration by his widow Alice -- but it's still an excellent view of his fiery final recordings. [N.C.]



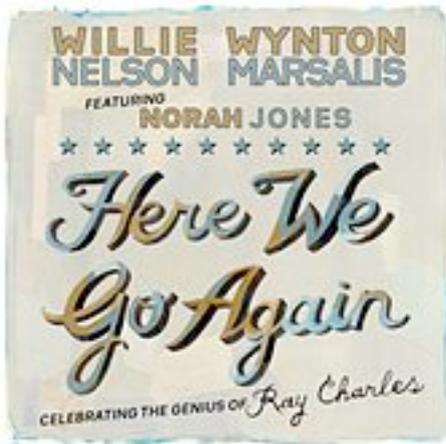
18. Starlicker
Double Demon

Rooted in the exploratory principles of Chicago's experimental music underground, Starlicker are a trio made up of cornetist and performance artist Rob Mazurek, drummer John Herndon (formerly of Tortoise) and rising vibraphone star Jason Adasiewicz. The three appeared on a recording in 2010 with a pair of bassists, but on this 2011 set the sound is sinewy and races along with an abstract flutter. The polyrhythmic figures of Adasiewicz and Herndon drive the recording relentlessly, as Mazurek floats along with a brassy warble on top. [N.C.]



17. Brad Mehldau
Live in Marciac

Although Brad Mehldau's talents in the trio setting and as a collaborator are indisputable, hearing him live underscores his prodigious skills as a soloist, technician and improviser. It's a thrill to hear pop tunes -- like "Martha My Dear," "Lithium" and "My Favorite Things" -- turned inside out with Mehldau's spontaneous, angular compositional ferocity; it's equally rewarding when he offers a painfully fragile, spare standard like "Secret Love." [N.C.]



16. Willie Nelson & Wynton Marsalis
Here We Go Again: Celebrating the Genius of Ray Charles (feat. Norah Jones)

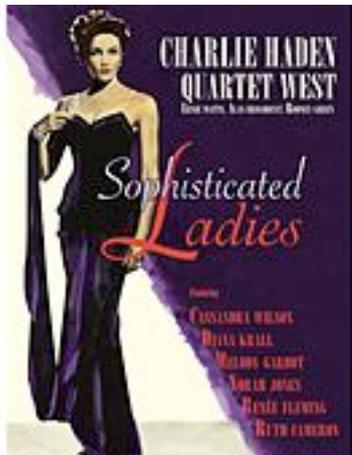
The previous concert collaboration that Willie and Wynton put out resulted in the first No. 1 pop album for both artists. So they decided to do it again, this time with Norah Jones, for a tribute to Ray Charles. Instead of being a crass cash-in, this feels just right, partly because the talented trio embodies Brother Ray's belief that blues, jazz, soul and country are all just separate streams from the same mighty river. Wynton's band blazes throughout, while each vocalist digs deepest on the ballads, including a version of "Losing Hand" that may actually best Ray's studio original. [Nick Dedina]



15. The New Gary Burton Quartet
Common Ground

Gary Burton's reformed quartet (featuring drummer Antonio Sanchez, guitarist Julian Lage and bassist Scott Colley) is the statesman vibraphonist's first working band in six years, and showcases his restraint as

an older, wiser bandleader at the peak of his powers. For as confident as Burton's playing is, what shines through is his ability to step back -- both on solos and as a songwriter -- to show off the considerable talents of his colleagues. Lage's "Etude" and Sanchez's "Common Ground" are among the record's most athletic tunes. [N.C.]



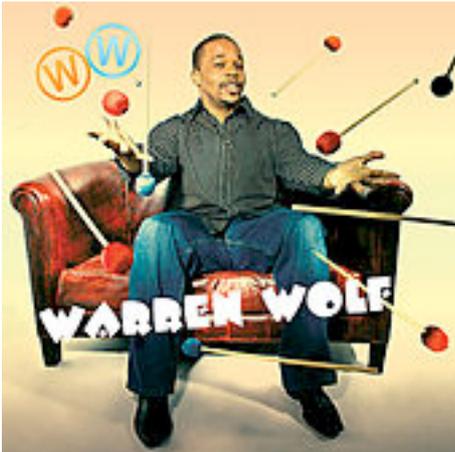
14. Charlie Haden
Sophisticated Ladies

Charlie Haden is a brilliant bassist who handles everything from country folk to the avant-garde with rare grace. With his Quartet West, he has combined two distinct passions: sensuous post-war bop and classic Hollywood crime films filled with tough dames and damaged men. Haden casts a stunning collection of guest vocalists in this romantic film-noir jazz adventure. String-laden instrumentals set the scene, while out of the shadows saunter the femmes fatales -- Diana Krall, Cassandra Wilson, Norah Jones, Melody Gardot, Renee Fleming and Ruth Cameron, who plays Mrs. Haden in real life. [N.D.]



13. Paul Motian
The Windmills of Your Mind

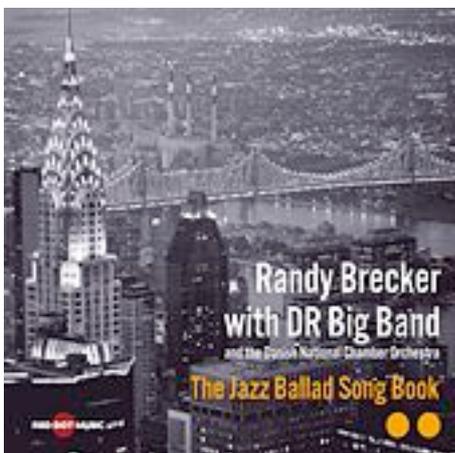
There's a mysterious melancholy that shrouds Paul Motian's atmospheric sessions with guitarist Bill Frisell and vocalist Petra Haden (daughter of Charlie). Complemented by Haden's plaintive delivery, the 80-year-old drummer's delicate brushwork is in top form on this set of standards and near-standards ("Lover Man," "I've Got a Crush on You"), and even makes a chestnut like "Tennessee Waltz" sing with remarkable poignancy. *The Windmills of Your Mind* is a dimly lit and richly emotional record. [N.C.]



12. Warren Wolf

Warren Wolf

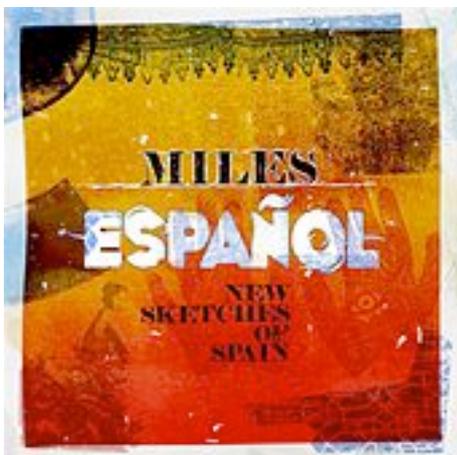
Backed by a cracking rhythm section -- including drummer Greg Hutchinson, bassist Christian McBride and pianist Peter Martin -- Warren Wolf's self-titled debut bristles with a young, authoritative energy. The explosive solo on "427 Mass Ave" opens the record by announcing the vibraphone player's compositional and technical chops, though he's soon sobered up by the sensitive, plaintive blues of "Katrina." Chick Corea's "Señor Mouse" is a testament to his good taste, with Wolf's vibe lines hung over a texture of marimba. Saxophonist Tim Green's fluid playing is a perfect complement. [N.C.]



11. Randy Brecker

The Jazz Ballad Song Book

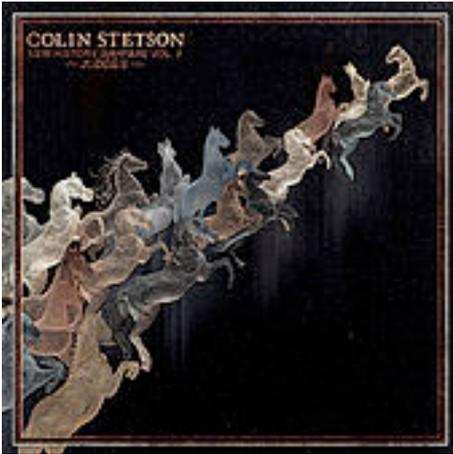
The most elegant big band record of 2011 is a product of the imaginative and elegant playing of trumpeter Randy Brecker and a well-balanced supporting performance by the Danish Radio Big Band and National String Orchestra. Excellent arrangements give the songs real poise, with two particular standouts in Peter Jensen's subtle "All or Nothing" and Jesper Riis' restrained accompaniment to "Someday My Prince." Brecker's tone -- round, warm and painfully delicate at times -- is the centerpiece, and he steps out with panache with a solo on his own tune, "I Talk to the Trees." [N.C.]



10. Various Artists

Miles Español

Based simply on the roster of musicians and material, it seemed inevitable that this reworking of Miles Davis' 1960 album *Sketches of Spain* would be among 2011's best jazz compilations. And indeed, the sensitive set delivers. The astute effort by Miles compilation master Bob Belden rolls together Miles' Latin-tinged songs with sensitivity and style, uniting his former sidemen -- Ron Carter, Chick Corea -- with a handful of excellent global musicians, such as Colombian harpist Edmar Castaneda and flamenco guitarist Chano Dominguez. [N.C.]



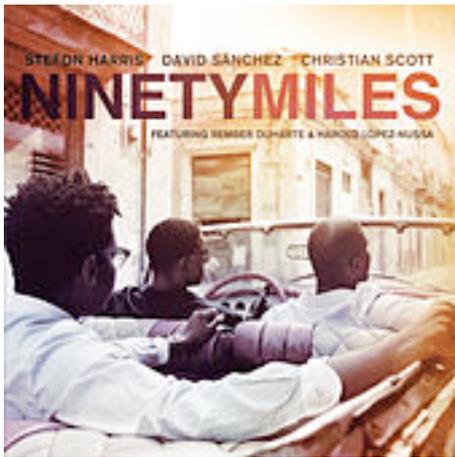
9. [Colin Stetson](#) [New History Warfare Vol. 2](#)

Getting your mind around Colin Stetson's solo work isn't easy: this set starts with a growling yawp of baritone saxophone before departing for more adventurous musical turf of electronic pulses, swirling loops and teeth-gnashing noise. Impressive, certainly, but when you consider that this former Arcade Fire and Bon Iver touring sideman recorded the brilliant mess of *New History Warfare Vol. 2: Judges* entirely live in single takes at Montreal's Hotel2Tango studio, it's clear his talent is staggering. Somewhere between free jazz and art rock, this is every bit as challenging as it is rewarding. [N.C.]



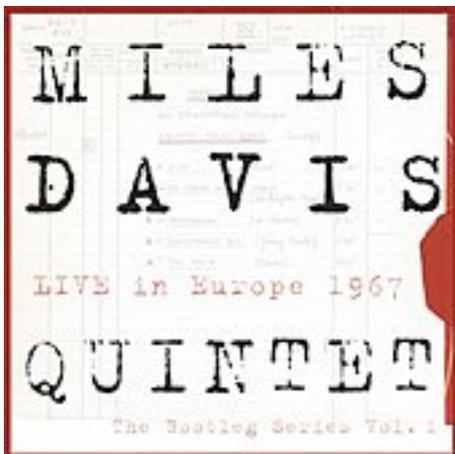
8. [Amir ElSaffar](#) [Inana](#)

Global jazz fusions tend to lack the synergy that's all over Iraqi trumpeter and composer Amir ElSaffar's *Inana*, which bridges Arabic musical traditions with American jazz and gives both equal footing. There are microtones and non-metered passages alongside Western harmonies and restless drum-set grooves. And somehow, it all just *feels* right. It can be solemn or frenetic, but these elegantly balanced tunes announce new possibilities in global jazz. [N.C.]



7. Stefon Harris, Christian Scott, David Sanchez **Ninety Miles**

The talented instrumentalists on *Ninety Miles* -- vibraphone player Stefon Harris, saxophonist David Sanchez and trumpeter Christian Scott -- are certainly accomplished in their own right, but combined, the trio reveals an especially vibrant energy. Recorded in Havana, the album includes renowned Cuban pianists Rember Duharte and Harold Lopez-Nussa, and a battery of local percussionists. The fusion helps the record emerge as the younger, modern, bright-eyed cousin to *The Buena Vista Social Club*, and a portrait that captures the potential of Cuba's falling borders. [N.C.]



6. Miles Davis **Live in Europe 1967 -- The Bootleg Series Vol. 1**

There's a certain ferocity in this live set from Miles' "second great quintet" -- the five-man outfit he led between '64 and '69 that included a young Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter and Tony Williams. Listen to Hancock on the opening solo on Miles' "Agitation" and it's clear the group was pushing their genre -- as both composers and soloists -- into unknown territory. At times it remains challenging to modern ears, so it's difficult to imagine how wild it must have sounded that night in Antwerp, Belgium. This is the first of a series of shows recorded by state radio in fall 1967. [N.C.]



5. Ambrose Akinmusire

When the Heart Emerges Glistening

Trumpeter Akinmusire's second album is an affair that reverberates with both a love of jazz traditions and a sharpened, contemporary sensibility. Along with a trio featuring pianist Gerald Clayton, bassist Harish Raghavan and drummer Justin Brown, Akinmusire is joined by tenor player Walter Smith III. The two horn players bob and weave elegantly in and out of one another's solos, and the rhythm section's responsive, dynamic shifts feel extremely fluid. It's rousing, soulful and vibrant, and offers a stylish introduction to one of jazz's bright new talents. [N.C.]



4. Lee Konitz/Brad Mehldau/Charlie Haden/ Paul Motian

Live at Birdland

It was a 1997 Blue Note session with Lee Konitz and Charlie Haden that helped introduce young Brad Mehldau to the jazz world. A dozen years later, the trio reconvened with Paul Motian, and Mehldau's intuitive playing and eloquent musical dialogue demonstrated that he'd become, in all ways, their peer. The fact that this gig was pulled off without preparation or rehearsal speaks to the towering ability of the performers. [N.C.]



3. Terri Lyne Carrington ***The Mosaic Project***

It might not be possible to get a full sense of jazz's leading women on a single recording, but drummer and bandleader Terri Lyne Carrington's project makes a worthy and disarmingly listenable effort. The roster of guests -- a multigenerational who's who including Esperanza Spalding, Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Sheila E. and Cassandra Wilson -- only begins to tell the story; the rest is laid out in a stunningly sophisticated blend of jazz, funk and pop. Among the many highlights is Wilson's sultry take on Al Green's 1972 hit "Simply Beautiful." [N.C.]



2. Steve Coleman ***The Mancy of Sound***

Saxophonist Steve Coleman has long pushed against traditional boundaries with musical experiments as ambitious as they are listenable. With the mesmerizing *Mancy*, the composer finds inspiration in both the cycles of nature and the spiritual traditions of West Africa's Yoruba people. Sound heady? Believe it. But as Coleman and his band dig into these cyclical,

repetitious instrumental patterns (many complemented by Jen Shyu's vocalizations), the album's weaving lines are disarming, lyrical and wholly mesmerizing. It's among 2011's most ambitious releases, and most successful. [N.C.]

Colin Vallon *R r u g a* Patrice Moret Samuel Rohrer



1. [Colin Vallon](#)

[Rruga](#)

In Albanian, *rruga* means "path," an apt title for this album given the deceptive simplicity in the routes laid out by this Swiss piano trio. Slow, pulsing chords and simple lines float along atop a wash of cymbals and knotty bass. And while much of the music has the contemplative quality of Brad Mehldau's forays into folk and pop, there's obvious technical muscle waiting to emerge in the quickened tempos of "Polygonia." Still, somehow, this all lulls us into a trance as we follow Vallon's steep path, from a simple point of departure to an abstract and challenging destination. [N.C.]