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## Culture Monster

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### 2011 year in review: Best in jazz

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From young stars following their unique vision to a parting session from a departed master of doing the same, there was no shortage of recordings worth celebrating in 2011. And one sour note.

**Ambrose Akinmusire**, “When the Heart Emerges Glistening” (Blue Note): It’s one thing to expect great things from an artist’s major label debut, it’s another pleasure entirely to have those expectations exceeded. Already possessed with his own tone on this evocative recording, this 29-year-old trumpeter-composer’s big year gets only better when you consider where he might go next.

**Aaron Goldberg and Guillermo Klein**, “Bienestan” (Sunnyside): Often a duet in name only led by Goldberg on piano and composer-arranger Klein on Fender Rhodes, “Bienestan” frequently taps the expert rhythm section of Matt Penman and Eric Harland, incorporating flashes of Cuban jazz and contemporary classical into an album-length exercise in music without borders.

**Endangered Blood**, “Endangered Blood” (Skirl): Though the name sounds like a drive-in horror movie classic, there’s nothing to be scared of in this sharply swung collection led by the dueling saxophones of Chris Speed and Oscar Noriega and the constantly shifting rhythmic backbone from avant-garde veterans Trevor Dunn and the octopus-armed drummer Jim Black.

**Starlicker**, “Double Demon” (Delmark): A high-octane Chicago trio featuring Tortoise drummer John Herndon, Exploding Star Orchestra cornetist Rob Mazurek and vibraphone powerhouse Jason Adasiewicz (who released the excellent “Spacer” with his own ensemble this fall), this recording takes the vibraphone trio into a new orbit with a relentless drive toward invention.

**Jeff Gauthier Goatette**, “Open Source” (Cryptogramophone): An enduring force for good around the local scene as chief of the Cryptogramophone label and co-producer of the Angel City Jazz Festival, Gauthier’s expressive violin has never sounded stronger than on this electronics-shaded album, which features longtime collaborators Nels and Alex Cline and a bracing new addition in trumpeter John Fumo.

**Matana Roberts**, “Coin Coin Chapter One: Les Gens De Couleur Libres” (Constellation): Recently named musician in residence at Santa Monica’s 18th Street Art Center, Roberts’ ambitious, intensely personal collection recalls the politically charged “Fire Music” of the late ’60s and early ’70s with a passionate exploration of slavery and her family history through spoken word and searing ensemble playing.

**JD Allen Trio**, “Victory!” (Sunnyside): Like a long-simmering sauce that’s been reduced to its most potent essence, this 12-track, 37-minute album from the saxophonist doesn’t waste a note or single breath, often recalling the classic sound and spirit of past giants such as John Coltrane while still marching forward with a razor-edged melodic focus.

**Colin Vallon Trio**, “Ruga” (ECM): Maybe the only jazz recording released in 2011 to draw musical cues from Turkish folk and Thom Yorke, this album from the young, Swiss-born pianist advances a longtime legacy of European jazz with empathetic ensemble playing and a rich variety of textured, evocative twists that sidestep convention.

**Bill McHenry**, “Ghosts of the Sun” (Sunnyside): A subtle, spacious recording led by McHenry’s restless saxophone, the album reveals new hidden dimensions with each listen courtesy of gestural guitar filigrees from Ben Monder and a typically understated, elliptical turn from the late drummer Paul Motian in one of his final recorded appearances.

**Shane Endsley and the Music Band**, “Then the Other” (Low Electrical Records): Coming out of the genre-hopping former L.A. fixtures Kneebody, the group’s trumpeter Shane Endsley delivers an album heavy on New Orleans-honed swing and head-bobbing instrumental workouts with the help of the great Craig Taborn on piano.

**The worst trend of 2011:** The Bay Area’s rising jazz scene — at L.A.’s expense: Our neighbors to the north have a long history of drawing touring artists who sometimes mysteriously pass by Los Angeles during swings west. Though the scheduled opening of the [SFJAZZ Center](#) next year will be a jewel that the whole West Coast should appreciate, it’s hard not feel overshadowed. The situation only gets worse with news that [Angel City Jazz Festival](#) co-organizer and longtime L.A. jazz booster Rocco Somazzi is moving to Oakland to open a new space in 2012 (though he’ll still produce shows here, along with the festival). With the musical climate as economically challenging as ever, the L.A. jazz scene needs to keep evolving or risk getting left behind.

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-- Chris Barton

*Photo: Ambrose Akinmusire. Credit: Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times*

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