

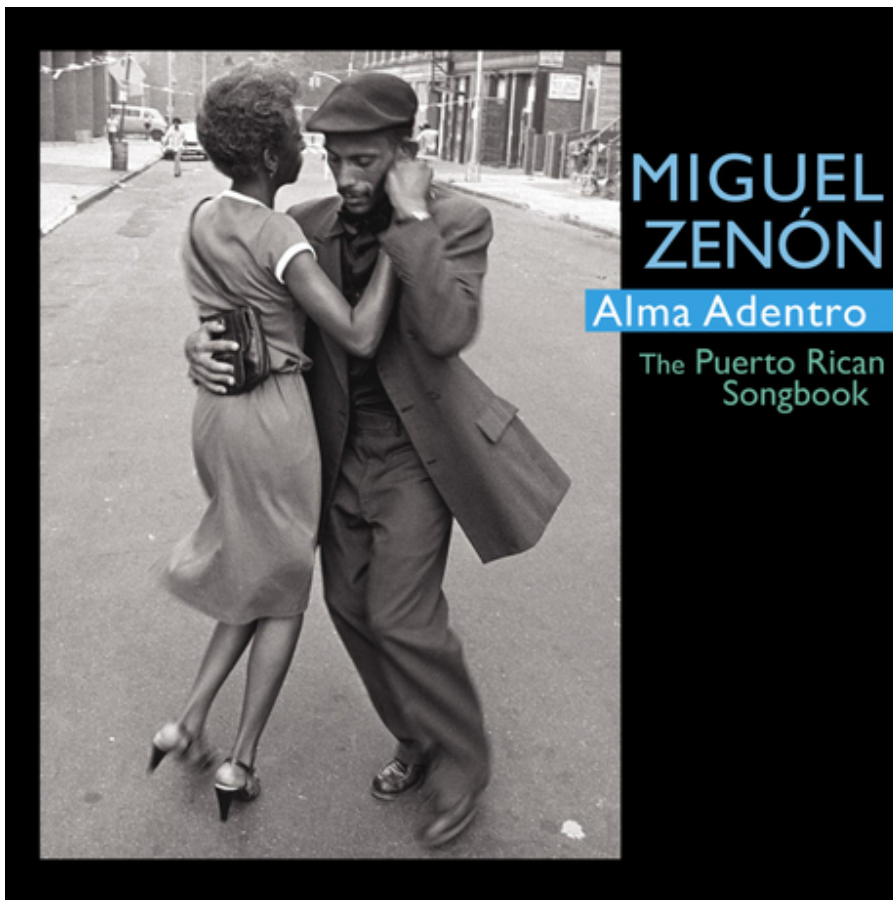
A Blog Supreme

The Best Jazz Of 2011

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With all

Marsalis Music

The cover art to *Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook*.

acknowledgements that the idea of designating "the best" music is silly, and with full admission that I didn't get around to every good record released in the last 12 months, and that this process is entirely subjective, yadda yadda yadda: Here is a list of my favorite jazz albums of 2011.

When I stare at this list, I see a lot of interpretation. I see four albums dedicated to imagining new settings for sources as disparate as Latin crooner anthems (Miguel Zenón), American patriotic songs (René Marie), forgotten jazz of the 1920s (Brian Carpenter) and PJ Harvey (Ben Allison). There's a sort of radical creativity here,

unmooring material from its original context and digging up its hidden lessons; it feels natural to our age.

I also see original visions of composition worth underscoring. There are the rollicking intensities from the James Farm collective, the juicy nuggets of the JD Allen Trio, the wandering wonder of Bill McHenry's pen. This, too, is a sort of radical creativity, this search for new ways to express beauty.

And, as always, there are albums that just *are*, that frustrate attempts at category. Records from Gretchen Parlato and Noah Preminger listen to music of innovators like Wayne Shorter and Ornette Coleman with new ears; they also express two disparate personal aesthetics of what it means to play jazz today. The incredible diversity of what's out there, even within a list which is necessarily missing so much else worth recognizing, is one of the great things about following this stuff in 2011.

I'd be happy if you told us your picks, and told us why. But, me first:

The Best Jazz Albums Of 2011



1. Miguel Zenon, 'Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook'

Artist: Miguel Zenón
Album: Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook
Song: Olas Y Arenas

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The alto saxophonist Miguel Zenon has made an exceptional album of standards. These aren't yet jazz standards, though; they began life as boleros and other popular songs generations ago, and they retain currency throughout Latin America today. They're all by Puerto Rican composers, many of whom — like Zenon — came to New York City to pursue music. In interpreting these melodramas and lingua franca anthems, Zenon has turned them inside out. The arrangements, for jazz quartet and 10 woodwinds, can be stunningly complex, but they only ever feel rich, supple, grand. And throughout, Zenon's quartet burns as if inspired by something deeper than the task of making pretty sounds. All available evidence seems to confirm this suggestion.



2. Gretchen Parlato, 'The Lost And Found'

Artist: Gretchen Parlato
Album: The Lost and Found
Song: Winter Wind



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You may have heard, perhaps even from this website, that Gretchen Parlato is a "different," or "new" type of jazz singer. True, her featherweight, susurrant delivery isn't exactly that of the great divas. But that's an issue of craft, and not art. On *The Lost and Found*, her third and best album yet, she and her band marshal this original sound on sambas, singer-songwriterly duets, pop covers, tunes by peers, a remix, reconfigured jazz classics, head-bobbers, ballads and a healthy dose of original material. It's catchy, tuneful stuff with contemporary vibrations — especially those of the R&B defined by hip-hop soul. Happily, it also retains the real-time interaction and harmolodic richness native to an older black popular music, one at the dawn of its second century.



3. JD Allen Trio, 'Victory!'

Artist: JD Allen Trio
 Album: Victory!
 Song: Mr. Steepy

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By jazz's long-winded standards, the trio led by tenor saxophonist JD Allen makes albums of miniatures. The band tries to say its piece in five minutes or less (usually less) and move on; that's more than enough time to establish a theme and go full-tilt boogie on it. On balance, *Victory!* is slightly mellower than the band's previous two records — more moments of zen, fewer all-out wind sprints — though an unassailable drum and bass hookup assures it swings as hard as there ever was. Whatever the setting, this collection is defined by a certain raw intensity. There's a well of triumphant feeling here, and it forces its way out, one three-minute burst at a time.



4. Noah Preminger, 'Before The Rain'

Artist: Noah Preminger
 Album: Before the Rain
 Song: Quickening

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The tenor saxophonist Noah Preminger plays ballads like an old guy, and that's a compliment. He's in his 20s, but on this collection of slow to mid-tempo tunes — his second album — he occupies melodies, inhabits their caverns and tight corners, and extracts their richest marrow. (Not surprisingly, his supporting cast is all some 15-ish years older than he is.) At the same time, *Before the Rain* also feels like a document of New York jazz today, something filtered through the long-tether compositions of Ornette Coleman and featuring a rhythm section which seems to fingerpaint around the beat. It's a record mining for beauty in new and old places, and often finding it.



5. Bill McHenry, 'Ghosts Of The Sun'

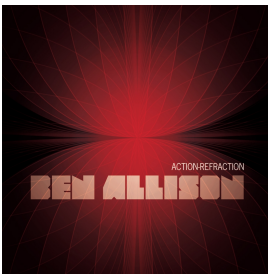
Artist: Bill McHenry



Album: Ghosts of the Sun
Song: La Fuerza

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The tenor saxophonist Bill McHenry improvises like a child, and that's a compliment. Sometimes, there are guidelines to interpret; sometimes, the rules are there to be ignored. But usually, there is the anchor of a splendidly rough-hewn melody, as there often are on *Ghosts of the Sun*, his third album with this particular quartet. This collection, recorded in 2006 but misfiled for years in his mother's house, will also go down as one of the last released documents of the late drummer Paul Motian. Motian's mysterious ability to imply time, but float freely around it, is all over this record; it brings out the best in a group of kindred spirits half his age.

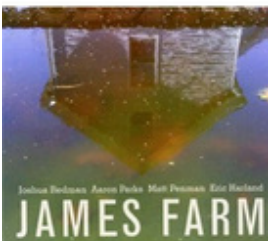


6. Ben Allison, 'Action-Refraction'

Artist: Ben Allison
Album: Action-Refraction
Song: Jackie-Ing

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Most jazz musicians today didn't grow up in an era in which jazz was pop music. So their first musical loves were probably elsewhere: rock, or rap, or what-have-you. The bassist Ben Allison — also known as a great composer — has been gradually merging this personal history into his jazz training. It hits a high-water mark with *Action-Refraction*, an album of covers from Thelonious Monk and Samuel Barber to PJ Harvey, The Carpenters, Donny Hathaway and Neil Young. In other situations, this sort of thing comes off as a compromise, but this record knows that you can't fake the funk. Allison's arrangements are full of beauty, spontaneity, experimentation. Even if you don't know the originals, you can hear the creativity here.



7. James Farm, 'JAMES FARM'

Artist: James Farm
Album: James Farm
Song: Polliwog

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There's nobody on this record named James Farm; there's no eponymous plot of land where produce is raised. But there are four folks who are well-known to today's jazz fans — Joshua Redman (saxes), Aaron Parks (piano), Matt Penman (bass), Eric Harland (drums) — who recorded a disc which somehow feels organic and earthy. All contribute songs to the group's repertoire, and in doing so, they've clearly soaked up grooves and chord progressions from today's pop music without ever forcing the issue. Then they worked out these textures and tunes on the road for a while before pressing record. The harvest feels unlike an all-star collective, and more like a homegrown band.



8. Captain Black Big Band, 'Captain Black Big Band'

Artist: Captain Black Big Band
 Album: Captain Black Big Band
 Song: Jena 6

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The Captain Black Big Band is more accurately the Captain Black Big Bands, plural: a rotating, multi-generational cast of top-notch jazz musicians from several East Coast cities. Pianist Orrin Evans plays ringleader, as he's the one with the Rolodex of musicians (so to speak) and the one willing to gather everyone together every so often. That makes for a good narrative of community spirit and tradition renewal, but more importantly, the bands make great music. The arrangements are brassy, the solos ballsy; seemingly every second of this live recording is suffused with redline intensity. It's a confirmation — and a celebration — that swing never lost its swagger.



9. Brian Carpenter's Ghost Train Orchestra, 'Hothouse Stomp'

Artist: Brian Carpenter's Ghost Train Orchestra
 Album: Hothouse Stomp: The Music of 1920s Chicago and Harlem
 Song: Voodoo

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The Ghost Train Orchestra, an initiative of the trumpeter and composer Brian Carpenter, plays music scored by largely forgotten composers and arrangers of the late 1920s. It's fun music; there's a peppy, charged, vaudevillian feel, and you could dance to some of it, too. It's also weird and unfamiliar music; not quite big-band swing, not quite early New Orleans polyphony, it rewards the close listener with unexpected twists and turns. Carpenter largely plays it straight, at least as he discerned it from the original recordings, though some strings and a musical saw bolster his vision. Whatever he's done, it's a neat trick: It's old music which somehow sounds new.



10. Rene Marie, 'Voice Of My Beautiful Country'

Artist: René Marie
 Album: Voice of My Beautiful Country
 Song: America the Beautiful

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The first release of 2011 from vocalist Rene Marie is an exhibition in interpretation. Among the repertoire choices are Dave Brubeck, "Shenandoah" and Jefferson Airplane; Marie works this through a vocal style which feels familiar and refreshingly non-generic. *Voice of My Beautiful Country* is also a album which contains her definitive takes on a few American patriotic songs,

including the much-banded-about national anthem with substitute lyrics. That affirms it as an exhibition of pride, as well: She's proud to live in a United States where dissent and creativity and non-standard histories have honor. The second release of 2011 from Rene Marie is filled with original songs; this one, of mostly covers, shows just as much originality.
