

Three Jazz Albums for People Who Don't Like Jazz

There are certain classic albums in every genre that everyone could benefit from owning: those greats made universally appealing by the sheer weight of their genius. In jazz these might include Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* or any of Louis Armstrong's sublime All-Stars recordings to name a few. But here are a few lesser known greats, albums you're unlikely to have heard if you're not a dedicated jazz fan, but which you might just find yourself liking, even if you decided long ago that jazz just isn't your thing.

"Choice Cuts" Screaming Headless Torsos

A compilation of tracks from a unique group, comfortably straddling the borders into rock and funk. Led by guitarist David "Fuze" Fiuczynski, the Torsos take on Hendrix, Miles Davis and Beatles tracks, originals, and a few taken from lesser-known repertoires. James Blood Ulmer's "Jazz is the Teacher (Funk is the Preacher)" takes on the role of scripture. Essentially a rock trio, with added percussion and the soul-style vocals of Dean Bowman up front, they play a kind of organic fusion of visceral, funky sounds and high-minded musicality, demonstrating a change in what jazz-fusion means that's come about since the seventies: no longer a marriage of styles, this is in fact fusion's mongrel offspring, sophisticated and raucous in uncompromising measures.

"Companion" Patricia Barber

Patricia Barber does a good impression of a sultry night-club singer, but in this beautifully recorded live set, you're likely to find a lot more. Her piano and organ playing is strident, stylish and funky; her voice is a carcinogenic, guilt-ridden bonfire. She writes bitter, poetic dirges, sung between haunting versions of songs you'll know already (all of them post-1965). One reason jazz musicians recycle the same standards so much is that you're actually supposed to know the tune: you begin the journey at the same point as the musicians. Barber's choices of covers have the same effect. The album's climax begins by unexpectedly luring you into an arrangement of "Black Magic Woman" and conveying you out the other end with an extraordinary guitar solo, followed by a barrage of percussion, perfectly crafted to leave you wondering how it ever managed to take you so far.

"The Atomic" Count Basie

Rated as something of a classic by Basie fans. In the doldrums of his career, in the mid-fifties, as bebop was becoming modern jazz's lingua franca, Count Basie, idiosyncratic daddy of Kansas-city swing, pulled this one out of left-field. The arrangements by young protégé Neal Hefti are for a large part Muppet-show wacky, spurting and clowning like hyperactive children. Even on the slow numbers the energy level teeters gleefully on the brink of explosion. The cover's got a big mushroom cloud on it which might offer insight: this could be the most delirious artistic reaction imaginable to the imminent possibility of mutually assured destruction. For those who take their nihilism with sugar and E-numbers.

David Walter Hall