

Best Jazz Albums of 2023

The year's most thrilling albums were made by artists pushing beyond borders, teaming with new collaborators and making bold statements of their own.



By Giovanni Russonello

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That thing we keep calling “jazz” refuses to stop overrunning its borders, reworking itself, showing up in new forms identifiable only by the most basic strands of their DNA. All of its subcultures churned out inspired work this year; many show up below.

1. Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah, ‘Bark Out Thunder Roar Out Lightning’

It's fitting, in this moment, that the hardest-hitting album on this list would be a celebration of Indigenous identity, resilience and resistance. For Chief Adjuah (formerly Christian Scott), “Bark Out Thunder Roar Out Lightning” is also his first hard break from jazz, a category he has been trying to slip his entire career. Here he sits with the other tradition that raised him: the “maroon” community of New Orleans's Black masking Indians, commonly known as Mardi Gras Indians. This is Adjuah's first LP without any trumpet. Instead he circles up with a group of family and longtime collaborators, revisiting classics from the call-and-response Black Indian repertoire and adding his own, newfangled rallying cries over plucked kora strings and charging drums.

2. Jaimie Branch, ‘Fly or Die Fly or Die Fly or Die ((World War))’

Jaimie Branch had nearly finished mixing this album — the third studio record from her trumpet-cello-bass-drums quartet, Fly or Die — when she died suddenly in 2022. It would be hard to imagine a more rousing and generous parting gift. Branch (like Adjuah) was a declarative trumpeter who had only recently embraced her unrefined-but-rewarding singing voice. With it she entreats us to love, to agitate and to put ourselves on the line.

3. Kassa Overall, 'Animals'



Kassa Overall's fusion of hip-hop and jazz feels like a natural extension of his larger creative inquiries. Michael Tyrone Delaney

Sharing a common ancestor, jazz and hip-hop ought to be a natural fit — but nobody has ever quite made this fusion feel like *theirs*. Enter Kassa Overall, the soft-spoken drummer, producer and M.C., who plays a different game: He's asking hard, analytical questions about romance and selfhood; social programming; mental health in an anxious world. He's also working with an uncanny cast of peers: Danny Brown, Nick Hakim, Laura Mvula, Wiki. That jazz and contemporary hip-hop are at the core of Overall's style is simply incidental. Which is also why it seems essential.

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4. Ambrose Akinmusire, 'Owl Song'

It's been a transformative year for Ambrose Akinmusire, who became the artistic director of the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz at U.C.L.A., left his longtime home on Blue Note Records and released a pair of spellbinding albums. (The other is "Beauty Is Enough," a fully improvised solo LP.) On "Owl Song," he brings together two master musicians who had hardly ever played together — the guitarist Bill Frisell and the drummer Herlin Riley — for a cozy but unadorned session, leaving plenty of open air in these eight original tunes.

5. Zoh Amba, Chris Corsano, Bill Orcutt, 'The Flower School'



Zoh Amba recorded her 2023 release with two trusted elders. Scott Rossi for The New York Times

Moving no more than three notes at a time, holding them steady and thinning them out, Zoh Amba plays tenor saxophone from inside the four walls of a rattling heart. Less billowy than Charles Gayle, not as wild as Gato Barbieri, slower footed than David Murray, her playing contains elements from each of these avant-garde saxophonists. She recorded this dense, 30-minute workout of mordant electric guitar and pummeled drums alongside two trusted elders from the grungier edge of the free-improvising circuit.

6. Jonathan Suazo, 'Ricano'

The Boston-based saxophonist and composer Jonathan Suazo is compelled equally by Kenny Garrett's soul-bop and Miguel Zenón's Puerto Rican jazz hybrids. On "Ricano," he leads a steel-toed Latin orchestra replete with hefty vocals, a forceful horn section and, over the course of the album, no fewer than seven percussionists playing Dominican and Puerto Rican instruments.

7. Mendoza Hoff Revels, 'Echolocation'

It's not a question of precision here, or a neat balancing act. The guitarist Ava Mendoza, the bassist Devin Hoff, the saxophonist James Brandon Lewis and the drummer Ches Smith are playing at peak intensity, with heavy focus and a lot of spillover. Pulling pages from Sonny Sharrock, Fred Frith, Glenn Branca and Tony Iommi, Mendoza holds the band together by blasting it apart.

8. Micah Thomas, 'Reveal'

Micah Thomas, an energetic and ambidextrous pianist known for his work in the saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins's quartet, was bound to make a big statement of his own. Still, the pianist's third LP arrives with characteristic modesty: an acoustic trio record on which he often turns up the action without raising the volume. Actually, when the rhythm section (Dean Torrey on bass and Kayvon Gordon on drums) escalates, Thomas seems most inclined to pull back.

9. Matana Roberts, 'Coin Coin Chapter Five: In the Garden'

Matana Roberts's "Coin Coin" series has been going for more than a decade, a continuing practice of exhuming and honoring and inheriting. The hymn-like songs on this LP are drawn from the annals of the artist's maternal ancestors, but Roberts, a saxophonist and self-described "sound quilter," gives these speakers a modern vocabulary and self-conception. Underneath is a mix of strings, horns and percussion, along with occasional synths from Kyp Malone, the album's producer.

10. Enji, 'Ulaan'

Don't beat yourself up too hard for missing this one when it came out in July, but don't let it pass you by: the third release from a young Mongolian-born, Munich-based singer with a voice pitched just above a whisper. Enji mixes cool jazz registers with echoes of her home country's "long song" (Urtiin Duu) tradition. Cafe-style jazz singers like this rarely sound so unpretentious, original and free.