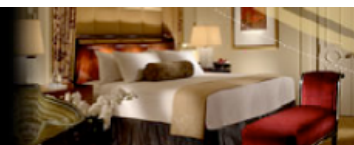




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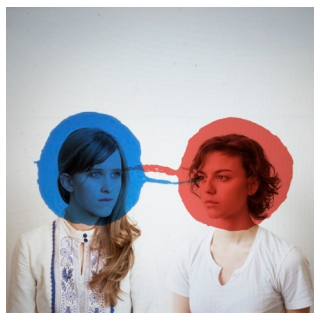
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Music / Post No Bills

Best of 2009, Part Four

Posted by Peter Margasak on Fri, Jan 22, 2010 at 3:08 PM

OK, here's the final installment of my Best of 2009 list. (And here are parts **one**, **two**, and **three**.) It may be a little anticlimactic if you've already seen this year's Pazz & Jop poll in the *Village Voice*, which came out a couple of days ago. But my top ten are all in a row for you, after the jump:



Dirty Projectors: *Bitte Orca*

10. Dirty Projectors, *Bitte Orca* (Domino)

No record I loved from 2009 irritated me more than the Dirty Projectors' *Bitte Orca*. Bandleader David Longstreth's confoundingly loopy, falsetto-heavy singing is so thickly ornamented with cloying curlicues it's enough to make my teeth ache—if it weren't for the music's impressive ambition and surfeit of ideas, I wouldn't be able to tolerate it. Some songs are noisy and abrasive, others smooth and funky, and the beguiling arrangements thoughtfully combine chamber-music influences with almost proggy grooves. Bubbly, fluid electric-guitar lines and clustered polyrhythms jostle against blocks of choirlike vocals and elaborate melodies that often seem to move independently of the rest of the band—and for the most part the warm, ultraprecise singing of Amber Coffman, Angel Deradoorian, and Haley Dekle balances Longstreth's excesses on the mike.

9. Martial Solal, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (CAM Jazz)

Even in his 80s, French pianist Martial Solal displays an undiminished creative drive. His dynamic performances are packed with fleet excursions—his mind is clearly still sharp and lucid, and his fingers are still nimble. For years Solal has been compared to Art Tatum, and he shares some of Tatum's uncanny ability to spin florid, detailed right-hand asides. Solal never simply discards the essential kernel of a tune—this set includes familiar standards like "On Green Dolphin Street" and "Round Midnight"—but he frequently renders it almost unrecognizable. He's quick-thinking and spontaneous, able to follow his own impulses—a quote from a familiar bebop number, a brief but intriguing tangle of notes like the one that opens "Lover Man"—wherever they lead, but no matter how dramatic the tangent he always maintains a logical through line.

8. Otto, *Certa Manhã Acordei de Sonhos Intranquilos* (Nublu)

On his excellent fourth album, Brazilian singer Otto draws liberally from reggae, electronica, and surf rock, energizing all of it with a full complement of Afro-Caribbean and Brazilian rhythms. Meanwhile his songwriting continues to gravitate toward the Brazilian romantic pop style called *brega*, though the music's muscular grooves tend to subvert its sentimentality. He gives the bombastic "6 Minutos," which easily could've been a mawkish power ballad, a no-nonsense treatment that makes it flat-out exhilarating, and on two gorgeous duets with Mexican pop star Julieta Venegas he modulates his bearish voice to blend perfectly with the raspy sweetness of hers.

7. Steve Lehman, *Travail, Transformation, and Flow* (Pi)

There's more than a little of Steve Coleman's metrically complex futuristic bebop in the music of fellow alto saxophonist Steve Lehman—the trumpeter on *Travail, Transformation, and Flow*, Jonathan Finlayson, cut his teeth with Coleman—but that influence is rubbing elbows with hip-hop and spectralism. On this stunning octet album, which transplants the sound of Blue Note's 60s avant-garde records into the 21st century, a dense matrix of cross-cutting rhythms (courtesy drummer Tyshawn Sorey, bassist Drew Gress, tubaist Jose Davila, and vibist Chris Dingman), rigorous melodic patterns, and unusual harmonies give the wonderful soloists, who also include saxophonist Mark Shim and trombonist Tim Albright, plenty to chew on. But even more exciting than the solos is the ensemble sound, with its constant permutations and resourceful ranginess.

6. Califone, *All My Friends Are Funeral Singers* (Secretly Canadian)

In jazz, woodshedding refers to time spent out of sight, practicing, brainstorming, and developing one's craft. But Califone seem to have done their woodshedding in public as Red Red Meat, which evolved from an excellent Stones-flavored narcotic rock band into a quasi-improvisational enigma. Califone has benefited from those years, when RRM always took the path of most resistance. Tim Rutili has always been a striking songwriter and singer, and his unforgettable melodies, sometimes rickety, sometimes tender, unfold through gloriously untidy arrangements that develop so organically they seem invented on the fly; the band's spaced-out, broke-down postblues sound world is undeniably all their own.

5. Die Enttäuschung, *Die Enttäuschung* (Intakt)

This quartet from Berlin continues to write pithy postbop swingers and uncork concise, biting solos whose vocabulary draws from jazz's entire history. The lean, craggy grooves of bassist Jan Roder and drummer Uli Jennessen give the music a buoyant drive without treading on the front-line action of bass clarinetist Rudi Mahall and trumpeter Axel Dörner. In both their individual solos and their knotty but airy multilinear improvisation, the horn men are exquisite in their focus and bracing in their tone.



4. Radian, **Chimeric** (Thrill Jockey)

Viennese instrumental trio Radian continue to build on the singular noise-and-rhythm excursions of early *This Heat* (though without obvious imitation or even significant borrowing), delivering with *Chimeric* their most searing, visceral piece of work. Stefan Németh provides the foreground elements, finding a kind of dry funk and abstruse melody in coruscating foreground noise; he's largely switched from synthesizer to electric guitar on this record, with even richer, more arresting results. And as always the remarkable drumming of Martin Brandlmayr—a twitchy, counterintuitive barrage of sparse grooves and electroacoustic textures—makes sense of the racket. Radian sound like no other band on the planet.



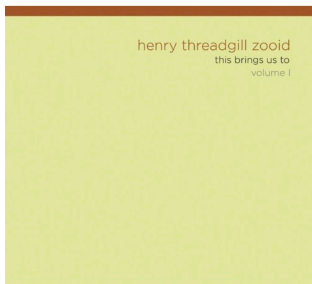
Die Enttäuschung: Die Enttäuschung

3. Neko Case, **Middle Cyclone** (Anti)

With every new record Neko Case seems to make a quantum leap—as a singer, as a songwriter, as an arranger—and *Middle Cyclone* is no exception. Yet as beautiful and precise as every facet of the music is, for me it's all about the vitality in her voice. Her lyrics are also superb: she tackles troubled love more directly and personally than she has in the past, at one point coming right out and saying, "The next time you say forever, I will punch you in your face."

2. Vijay Iyer Trio, **Historicity** (ACT)

Pianist Vijay Iyer has been turning out ambitious, daring records and giving bracing live performances for years now, but on *Historicity* everything came together. Though it includes a handful of his brooding, tangled originals, most of the record consists of reshaped covers, both from jazz heavies like Andrew Hill and Julius Hemphill and from pop stars like M.I.A. and Stevie Wonder. Iyer and his rhythm section—bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore—turn the usual MO of the piano trio on its head, with all three players stretching and molding tempo, density, phrasing, and groove like clay, creating a wonderful tension between the audience's expectations for a familiar song and what actually unfolds.



1. Henry Threadgill Zooid, **This Brings Us To, Volume 1** (Pi)

Former Chicagoan Henry Threadgill kept a low profile for most of the aughts, but his return with the quintet Zooid proved he wasn't idle all that time. The scientific meaning of the band's name—a cell that can move independently within an organism—is reflected in the band's methodology, where for each tune the players are assigned clusters of intervals within which they can range freely. That might sound a bit heady, but the music itself is pure pleasure. Guitarist Liberty Ellman, drummer Elliot Kavee, bass guitarist Stomu Takeishi, tubaist-trombonist Jose Davila, and Threadgill sculpt elaborate pieces, generating a constant flux of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic juxtapositions, but despite the surfeit of detail and information, the arrangements stay airy. Most important, the parameters Threadgill has established for the band's improvisations—intended to push players out of their habits and vocabularies—result in music that's uniquely and beautifully idiosyncratic.

Today's playlist:

Henry Threadgill Zooid: **This Brings Us To, Volume 1**

Tony Wilson Sextet, **Pearls Before Swine** (Drip Audio)
Pedro Luis e a Parede, **Ponto Enredo** (EMI, Brazil)

Willie Hutch, **Soul Portrait** (Shout!)

Christian Wallumrød Ensemble, **Sofienberg Variations** (ECM)

Cookies, **Chains: The Dimension Links 1962–1964** (RPM)

Tags: Best of 2009, Dirty Projectors, Martial Solal, Otto, Steve Lehman, Califone, Die Enttäuschung, Radian, Neko Case, Vijay Iyer, Henry Threadgill Zooid