

East Bay Express

The Best Music of 2009

Our critics recommend the year's best in folk, hip-hop, metal, jazz, rock, R&B, and more — both here and abroad.

By Rachel Swan

Stefon Harris & Blackout, *Urbanus*

Leaving his prestigious post at SFJAZZ Collective may have been a salutary thing for vibraphonist Stefon Harris. His side project, Blackout, features a group of heavyweights — pianist Marc Carey, saxophonist Casey Benjamin, bassist Ben "B Dub" Williams, and drummer Terreon "Tank" Gully — who all have roots in the jazz tradition, but still give it plenty of latitude. Harris formed Blackout several years ago before taking a hiatus. Now he's returned with a surprising mix of tunes, most of them arranged in a peculiar, funky way. The highlight is a cover of Stevie Wonder's "They Won't Go (When I Go)," which sets Benjamin's vocoder against a bass clarinet — an illogical combination that dazzles. It lies among several other groove-oriented ballads, including a stylish interpretation of the Buster Williams tune "Christina." Carey's piece "The Afterthought" gives *Urbanus* enough bustling energy to make good on its name. Harris has a deep and far-ranging ear, and a habit of singing audibly through all his solos. He's conversant not only in straight-ahead but also R&B, funk, and avant-garde forms — and *Urbanus* explores all of them. (Concord)

M.F. Doom, *Unexpected Guests*

Some rappers think it best to construct a persona at the front end of each other their albums, then inhabit it. Others reveal themselves in bits and pieces, hiding beneath pop culture allusions or oblique language. M.F. Doom obviously belongs to the latter school, and he's one of the few artists who does it right. In his first verse on *Unexpected Guests* Doom reimagines himself — aptly— as part-Muhammad Ali, part-Aesop fabler (i.e., he hits hard and spins yarns that careen in every direction). Fans of Doom's previous material will find a lot to like here, from the odd-bar flows to the aphorisms, the untraceable samples, the recurring metaphors, and the winking references. And as its title indicates, *Unexpected Guests* is anything but predictable. The guest artists offer many surprises of their own, from Ghostface's cameo on "Angels" to Masta Killa's rap on "E.N.Y. House," (which bobbles quotes from Mad Cobra and Blahzay Blahzay). Still, Doom stands head and shoulders above the rest. (Gold Dust Media)

Vijay Iyer Trio, *Historicity*

While his peers try to propel the jazz tradition into contemporary hip-hop and R&B, pianist Vijay Iyer has burdened himself with an even riskier cross-pollination. His version of jazz bleeds into just about every pop genre that exists, but still takes itself seriously as jazz. Iyer's new album *Historicity* careens in every direction, with a riveting cover of the M.I.A. hit "Galang" (with the piano playing all her synthetic bleeps and blips), the oft-sampled Ronnie Foster fusion track "Mystic Brew," and even a zigzag-y version of Leonard Bernstein's ballad "Somewhere." His interpretation of the Stevie Wonder tune "Big Brother" is disarming, with quivery bowed bass by Stephen Crump and weird accents by drummer Marcus Gilmore. In its totality, *Historicity* is the type of exposition that all modern jazz musicians are trying

to create. It's diffuse in terms of reach, but lean in format. Iyer is clearly a well-disciplined and rigorous musician, but his imagination has no checks. (Act Music & Vision)

Robert Glasper, *Double Booked*

Keyboard Robert Glasper carved out his own hipster marketing niche by mixing hip-hop with jazz in a way that actually seemed credible. *Double Booked* culminates an experiment that Glasper began, tentatively, in his 2005 album *Canvas*, and continued in 2007's *In My Element* (which features jazz songs based on J Dilla samples). This time, he went all the way. As the title suggests, *Double Booked* is half jazz (and gospel-style jazz, at that), with five originals by Glasper and one inspired version of a Monk tune, all performed by Glasper's trio (Vicente Archer plays bass, drummer Chris "Daddy" Dave keeps time). The other half is jazzy R&B, with vocoder by Casey Benjamin (whose soulful interpretation of "Butterfly" recalls the original Herbie Hancock record), Derrick Hodge on electric bass, Jahi Sundance on turntables, and two unforgettable cameos by Bilal. It's a self-consciously hip lineup, but beneath all that gloss, the music has depth and sophistication. Even a purist would get into it. (Blue Note)

Raekwon, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx... Pt. II*

All bets were off when Raekwon decided to make a comeback this year with, of all things, a sequel to his classic 1995 release, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. It's a nostalgia-based gangster album, but this time, Raekwon delivers. His rhymes paint all the sordid details of an imaginary New York neighborhood that only exists on Wu Tang albums: Men step out of their apartments and shank each other, crack is the main export, every day marks a new recon mission. Fans of classic Wu Tang will appreciate the samurai whooshes, B-movie samples, and James Cagney rap style. Raekwon and his brethren (which include Ghostface, Inspectah Deck, Masta Killa, and Method Man) have a medieval sense of retributive justice, but their observations are fascinating: One of the best tracks is "Pyrex Vision," a 54-second monologue about crack, with a beat supplied by Marley Marl. It's one of many surprises. (Ice H2O)

Wale, *Attention Deficit*

That ubiquitous single "Chillin" — with Lady GaGa on the hook, modulating her voice to sound exactly like M.I.A. — helped cement Wale's status as a crossover artist, but it's actually the least interesting track on an otherwise promising debut. By "promising," I mean a little to the left of what you'd expect from someone with major label backing, and production credits from Mark Ronson (the man behind Amy Winehouse's "Rehab"). Ronson obviously saw a lot of potential in Wale, a DC-based hip-hop artist who came up performing with a nine-piece go-go band. He naturally inclines toward syncopated rhythms and tends to rap with a swingy, dotted-eighth feel. Wale's cadence will draw you right in, but it's his intellect that really sustains the fourteen tracks of *Attention Deficit*. From flipping well-known samples by Tribe and Kool & the Gang, to adopting a woman's perspective in "Diary" — based on a loop from "La Valse D'Amélie" — Wale shows himself to be a clever and versatile emcee. Right off the bat, he references Michael Vick, *Slum Dog Millionaire*, and radio "snap jams" (i.e., minstrelsy). For someone with such a huge marketing machine behind him, that's unexpectedly thoughtful. (Allido/Interscope)

Del tha Funkee Homosapien & Tame One, *Parallel Uni-verses*

It wasn't obvious that Jersey rapper Tame One and Oakland's Del tha Funky Homosapien would work well as a pair. Tame is the catchier of the two — the one who could have a successful mainstream career if his rhymes weren't so smart and his beats weren't so underground. Del, on the other hand, has such an inimitably lethargic, sneering flow that it seems odd to pair him up with anyone. And yet, the two of them have amazing chemistry and really complement each other. *Parallel Uni-verses* really gets started with "Flashback," a string of old-school references (to Blowfly, Salt-N-Pepa, and the slang expression "bobbin' and weavin'") that touch on pop culture of the 1980s, historical events, and both rappers' individual pasts. Producer Drum & Knowledge contributes some complex and layered backing tracks, combining the required snare and high hat with spy-movie horn lines, jazz bass, and — in "We Taking Over" — a smear of violins. In many songs, the beats riff off the rhymes, and vice versa. It demands multiple listens, but the payoff is terrific. (Gold Dust Media)

Ledisi, *Turn Me Loose*

A look back at Ledisi's career is like tracing a zigzag. She started out playing hip-hop-driven soul, then forayed into jazz, then returned to soul but sang in an older style. Collectively, her albums are more of a sonic commentary than a linear trajectory. This year's *Turn Me Loose* is Ledisi's second effort since getting "discovered" in mainstream circles, and it's a large improvement on the more pop-oriented *Lost and Found*. Listen to the stubborn lyrics and gristly bass lines of the title track, or the heartbreak song "Alone" — a simple R&B waltz that Ledisi adorns with her moody, vibrato voice — and you'll hear a singer in her element. Ledisi had a hand in writing and producing most of the tracks, and it often sounds as though she's singing to someone in particular. Thus, "Please Stay" is a little more plaintive than a typical song about seduction, and "I Need Love" sounds more pained than your average heartbreak ballad. Most songs feature live instrumentation, with ensembles that include guitarist Errol Cooney and drummer Teddy Campbell, both of whom are stars in their own right. At the end of the day though, it's big-voiced Ledisi who makes the tunes crackle. (Verve)

The Nice Guy Trio, *Here Comes the Nice Guy Trio*

It's not often you hear a horn player with as much emotional range as Darren Johnston. There's no question he's capable of round, fat tones and brassy bombast, but he can also play delicately for most of an album — as he does on *Here Comes the Nice Guy Trio*, and still give the music a lot of texture and personality. His songs are full of every type of intonation that exists in the horn world, from long slurs and trills to quick, explosive blasts and careful staccato putts. More interesting, yet, are Johnston's compositions, with their unobvious melodies and weird mish-mashings of instruments: The Nice Guy Trio comprises Johnston on trumpet, Rob Reich on accordion, and Daniel Fabricant on bass, plus a slew of guests. In all, the album contains five tracks by Johnston (the most beautiful is "Simple Life"), three by Reich, one by Fabricant, one by Charles Mingus, and one by Ornette Coleman (just to give you a sense of their influences). Recorded at Oakland's New Improved Recordings, it has a real bedroom studio sound that befits the tunes and the band's sensibility. (Porto Franco)

Donald Bailey, *Blueprints of Jazz Volume 3*

When he cofounded San Francisco record company Talking House, Marc Weibel had the brave — if somewhat unprofitable — idea of recording a few unsung jazz artists among the indie rock acts on his roster. The series, called

Blueprints of Jazz, features three albums, including one by drummer Donald "Duck" Bailey. Bailey's record stands out in particular, partly because it's only his second album as a leader (he made his first in the 1970s, featuring harmonica instead of drums), and partly because Bailey lives right here in the East Bay. With a quintet that also features freewheeling tenor saxophonist Odean Pope, it combines technical sharpness and imagination with a history that's alive and palpable. Pope wrote or co-wrote most of the tunes, though the hippest ones are a blues by Bailey's Philly pianist Hasaan Ibn Ali, and a waltz by Donald's brother Morris, which has a real behind-the-beat, syncopated feel. It closes out with Bailey playing the old ballad "Blue Gardenia" on harmonica. He gives the tune a sweet, moody cast, recalling the late jazz singer Dinah Washington. It's like visiting a ghost from the past. (Talking House)