

The Best-Sounding Jazz LPs

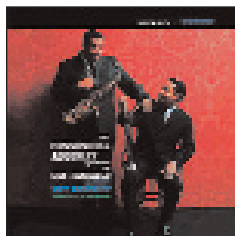
Fred Kaplan

Twenty years into the CD revolution, we find ourselves—at least those among us with a passion for such things—in the midst of an LP renaissance. Thanks to Classic Records, Analogue Productions, Speakers Corner, and a few other audiophile labels, golden-age jazz albums are being reissued on gloriously thick slabs of virgin vinyl. Meanwhile, due to sonic improvements in digital reproduction, prices for original vinyl pressings are plunging. The time seems ripe, then, for a list of the best-sounding jazz LPs.

I stress the phrase “best-sounding.” To make the list, an album must bear music that’s at least very good (no Finnish Dixieland here). But the premium is on sonics, and all the choices meet demanding audiophile standards (hence, no Charlie Parker either). I should also make clear—as Wayne Garcia and Bob Gendron did a few issues back in their similar “Great and Great-Sounding Rock LPs” piece—that this is not meant as a comprehensive catalog. Despite nearly 30 years of collecting, I don’t own everything and I’ve no doubt overlooked some wonders from my stash.

After each album title I cite the original label, followed in some cases by the reissue label. If the reissue is available (or worth getting) as a 45rpm pressing as well as 33 1/3, I note that in parentheses. (Analogue Productions has issued several titles in 45rpm, spread out on two discs; Classic has gone 45 with one-sided LPs, spread out on four.) I also mark an asterisk (*) next to the album’s title if it was (or should have been) included on my list of the 20th century’s 100 best jazz albums in Issue 122. That list, by the way, was based entirely on musical criteria.

Cannonball Adderley: **Somethin’ Else* [Blue Note/Classic 1595 (also mono and 45rpm)]; *In San Francisco* [Riverside/Analogue Prod. 1157 (and 45rpm)].

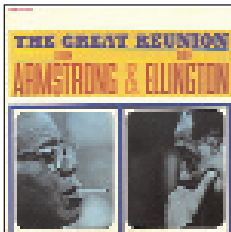


Julian “Cannonball” Adderley blew the most mellifluous alto saxophone, and these albums, recorded in 1958 and ’59, span the

range of what he could do. The first is a collection of standards, with Miles Davis as lyrical sideman, recorded at Blue Note’s studio with pristine precision. The latter is a live session of sophisticated soul, with brimstone brother Nat on cornet. It catches the wall-to-wall you-are-there ambience of a jazz club. In their own ways, both are marvels.

Louis Armstrong: *Satchmo Plays King Oliver* [Audio Fidelity/Classic AFSD-5930]; & **Duke Ellington:**

Play Together for the First Time [Roulette/Classic SR-52074]; & **Duke Ellington:** *The Great Reunion* [Roulette SR-52103]; & **Ella Fitzgerald:** *Porgy & Bess* [Verve MGVS-6040-2].



Not the very best Armstrong, but still wonderful. The King Oliver tribute is a stunning find, with

Pops and his sextet blazing through the likes of “St. James Infirmary,” “Frankie & Johnny,” and “Jelly Roll Blues” picked up by Telefunken microphones arrayed in an M-S pattern. Satch’s brass-blare trumpet, Peanuts Hucko’s licorice clarinet, and Trummy Young’s slide trombone are right there in the room. The duets with Duke are spirited affairs, only slightly less present. The Gershwin is a class act. The original (black label) pressing sports a gatefold cover, a big booklet, and an orchestra with a spacious soundstage, booming tympani, and silky strings.

Count Basie: *88 Basie Street* [Pablo/Analogue Prod. 2310-901 (and 45rpm)].



One of Basie’s last albums. His great bands had long departed. Still, this has ample charms, and the fidelity is awesomely high. You get every nuance

of Basie’s touch—the full percussive snap and harmonic bloom; the sax section swoons; the horns scream; the dynamics whisper and swell. (There’s also a very good digital disc from JVC’s XRCD series.)

Bill Berry: *For Duke* [M&K RealTime RT-101 (direct-to-disc)].

A septet of (mainly) Ellington alumni—including Berry, Ray Brown, and Britt Woodman—trots out the warhorses (“Take the A Train,” “Mood Indigo,” “Satin Doll,” etc.). The band’s a bit tepid, compared with the real thing, but it’s good enough, and the sound is spectacular, a favorite demo disc of the late ’70s and one of the most realistic jazz recordings ever made. M&K later reissued this and its “Fatha” Hines album [see below] on a single CD, which, amazingly, is almost as real.

Clarinet Summit: *In Concert at the Public Theater* [India Navigation IN-1062].

The idea behind this 1981 live concert was a gamble. Four very different clarinetists, playing all together, with no

rhythm section for back-up. Jimmy Hamilton, the Ellington veteran, was lured out of retirement for the occasion which also included Alvin Batiste, the New Orleans master; John Carter, the abstract expressionist; and, on bass clarinet, David Murray, then the eclectic wonderkind. It paid off wondrously. The highlights are the standards—“Groovin’ High,” “Jeep Blues,” and a sweltering Batiste-Hamilton duet on “Honeysuckle Rose.” You hear the air flow through those dark wooden tubes, the musicians’ shoes tapping the floor, and the audience’s startled laughter wafting through the hall. (Avoid *Volume II*, taken from the same concert. Also stay away from the CD, which combines all the tunes in the order played and which sports, puzzlingly, just so-so sonics.)

Ornette Coleman & Charlie Haden: *Soapsuds, Soapsuds [Artists House AH-9406].

Ornette turns to the tenor sax on this little-known late '70s session, playing duets with Haden, the bassist from his erstwhile breakthrough quartet. They play original tunes, mainly ballads, and the theme from *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (which, you realize, sounds a lot like “Lonely Woman”). The music is riveting, the sound pleasantly in-your-face. A Verve CD reissue, put out years later, falls far short. Where, you ask, are Ornette’s masterpieces, *Change of the Century* and *The Shape of Jazz to Come*? Their sound

is OK, but not great. Ditto, below, for the absence of Coltrane’s *Giant Steps*, *A Love Supreme*, and *Live at the Village Vanguard*.

John Coltrane: *Blue Train [Blue Note/Classic 1577]; *SoulTrane [Prestige/Analogue Prod. 7142 (and 45rpm)]; Ballads [Impulse! A-32]; John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman [Impulse! AS-40/Speakers Corner].



What more is there to say? These four albums capture the most adventurous tenor saxophonist tracing the more accessible paths of transition between his '50s bebop roots and his '60s spiritual explorations. *Blue Train* is his purest immersion into “hard-bop” and a textbook case of “Blue Note sound”—the crisp cymbals, wide soundstage, warm horns, clean balance, and, usually the glaring flaw, a somewhat dimmed piano. *SoulTrane* finds him applying his “sheets of sound” style to standards, in a more upfront sound. *Ballads* and the Hartman album feature his classic quartet in its most commercial—but not remotely sell-out—mode, more lushly recorded. (Rudy Van Gelder was the engineer for all.) The Speakers Corner reissue of *Ballads* sucks out some of the air; its *Hartman* reissue is sub-lime. *SoulTrane* and *Ballads* are also well served on

Mobile Fidelity SACDs, though the vinyl rules.

Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue [Columbia/Classic CS-8163 (and 45rpm)]; The Complete Prestige Quintet Recordings (esp. *Cookin'*, *Workin'*, *Relaxin'*) [Prestige 7094, 7166, 7129/Analogue Prod. (and 45rpm, mono), five-LP box set, 33rpm APJ-075]; *The Complete Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1964-68 [Mosaic Records MQ10-177]; *Bags' Groove* [Prestige/Analogue Prod. 7109 (and 45rpm)]; & Gil Evans: *Sketches of Spain* [Columbia/Classic CS-8271 (and 45rpm)]; *Miles Live Around the World* [Warner Bros. (Germany) 9362-46132 1].



Miles Davis’ 1959 *Kind of Blue* is a truly revolutionary concept album that’s also a giant hit. Instantly appealing on a dozen levels, it’s still a best-seller after nearly a half-century. If you can find a clean copy, the original stereo pressing, with the “six-eyes” label, is a joltingly vivid recording. Classic Records seems to release a new, slightly different reissue every year; they all come very close to the original, while the 45rpm pressing exceeds it. The 1956 Prestige dates—five albums recorded in marathon sessions—are best heard in AP’s box set or in separate 45rpm double-LPs. The latter are spooky; the first time I heard Coltrane solo on

Cookin', I leapt off the couch. The '60s quintet sessions feature Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, and Wayne Shorter. In those days, Columbia wreaked havoc in post-production, piling on the EQ and reverb. Mosaic's box set returns to the unadulterated mastertapes and they sound terrific, in the same league as *Kind of Blue* (no surprise, as they share the same engineer, the unjustly neglected Fred Plaut). Columbia's CD set of the same recordings, remastered by Mark Wilder, sounds very nearly as good. *Sketches of Spain* was Miles' second-biggest hit: exquisite solos in front of Gil Evans' swooning orchestral arrangements. The sonics on Classic's 45rpm are jaw-dropping. Listen to the percussion, the harp, the horns, the air. *Live Around the World* consists of highlights from live concerts in the '80s, the more melodic of Miles' jazz-rock fusion periods, and he plays with startling gusto. The sound is warm, detailed, and auditorium-spacious.

Paul Desmond:
Desmond Blue [RCA/
Classic LSP-2438].

It's schmaltz, but suavely so. Paul Desmond, the personification of early '60s sophistication and best-known as Brubeck's sometime-sidekick who wanted to play the alto sax like a dry martini, blows romantic ballads before a big string orchestra. But damn,

he plays so gorgeously, those strings are so silky, and the cushy ambience just makes you sway. BMG's CD doesn't cut it.

Eric Dolphy: **Out to Lunch* [Blue Note 4163].

The raw and brilliant Eric Dolphy took the alto saxophone to the next step beyond Charlie Parker; he teamed up too briefly with Coltrane; and he died, in 1964, way too young. *Out to Lunch* is his most exquisitely experimental work, featuring Bobby Hutcherson on vibes, Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Tony Williams on drums, Ron Carter on bass, and some of the most oddly appealing sounds Blue Note ever laid down on disc. Van Gelder matches the bold music with some of his most upfront engineering. Those vibes clang, and all the other instruments do what they're supposed to do, too. Brilliant, engrossing stuff.

Duke Ellington:
**Masterpieces by Ellington* [Columbia CL-825 (mono)]; *Duke's Big 4* [Pablo/Analogue Prod. 2310-703 (and 45rpm)]; & *Ray Brown: This One's for Blanton* [Pablo/Analogue Prod. 2310-720 (and 45rpm)].

Masterpieces is a 1950 recording, Ellington's first long-playing record album, which allowed him to stretch his three-minute hits into 15-minute arrangements that still astonish with

their sophistication, versatility, and heady swing. Fred Plaut sat at the controls and, except that it's in mono, you'd think this was an audiophile demo disc. So many colors, such true tones and vast dynamics! (Columbia Legacy pressed an excellent, DSD-mastered CD as well.) The Pablos, small-group sessions recorded in 1973 near the end of Duke's life, are fairly routine, though Ellington shows his percussive piano style in great form and color. The duet with Ray Brown is the more musically compelling, and the microphones pick up

Brown's bass-plucking in all its dynamic subtlety. *Big 4*, with Brown, Joe Pass, and Louie Bellson, is the sonic hair-raiser, the quartet right there, trading phrases in the same ambient space.

Bill Evans: **Waltz for Debby* [Riverside 9399/Analogue Prod. APJ-009]; **Sunday at the Village Vanguard* [Riverside 9376/Analogue Prod. APJ-140 (and 45rpm)].

Some would say I've written enough about these 1961 albums, both recorded live at the Vanguard—piano-trio jazz par excellence. I have never heard a clean pressing of

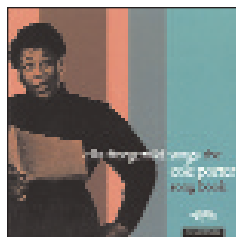


the original Riversides, but AP's vinyl reissues are jaw-dropping. I've been to the Vanguard many times, and this is what the place sounds like (except that the piano's on the left, not the right). The *Waltz for Debby* 45rpm is marred by boomy bass, which is not present on either AP's 33 1/3 pressing or its 45 for *Sunday*. AP also has a very good SACD, with the added attraction of alternative takes.

Gil Evans: *Out of the Cool [Impulse!/Speakers Corner A-4].

This is the best album that Gil Evans made without Miles Davis. Evans was a “vertical” arranger, with a flair more for stacking harmonies than for pushing a melodic line forward. *Out of the Cool* boasts his most lushly dissonant harmonies and a muscular propulsive edge, to boot. Rudy Van Gelder picks it all up with extremely high fidelity. The Speakers Corner reissue is one of that company’s best; if anything, it’s a bit better than the superb original.

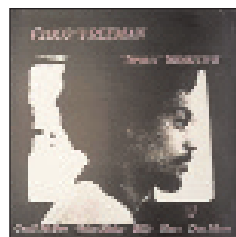
Ella Fitzgerald: *The Gershwin Songbook [Verve/Speakers Corner MG-VS-6082-5]; *The Cole Porter Songbook [Verve/Speakers Corner MG-V-4001-2 (mono)]; *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie! [Verve/Classic V6-4053]; Like Someone in Love [Verve MG-V-4804].



Ella Fitzgerald’s American Songbook series was one of the great ideas in the history of jazz recordings, and put both Ella and the Verve label on the map. With Nelson Riddle arrangements, the Gershwin is the best of

the bunch, sonically and otherwise, especially the original pressings, though Speakers Corner’s four-LP box is an extremely close second—and pristine clean. Her voice is upfront and 3D; the orchestra is spread across the soundstage, and front to back too, with fine detail and airy ambience. Take note, though, that even the Gershwins wrote a few duds, and they’re here along with the masterpieces. The Porter is, musically, the most consistently splendid; though mono, the orchestra has wondrously deep layers. The other two albums, with smaller ensembles, mark rare occasions when Ella paid close attention to the lyrics, and the results are captivating. *Clap Hands* includes the most breathtaking vocalizing of “Round Midnight” and possibly the most intimate sonics of any jazz vocal record in history. Classic’s reissue chokes off a lot of air, but is better than nothing if you can’t find the original. *Like Someone*, another collection of ballads, is nearly as luminous.

Chico Freeman: *Spirit Sensitive [India Navigation/Analogue Prod. APJ-020].



This 1979 album triggered the start

of a trend that re-energized jazz for the rest of the century—avant-garde musicians rediscovering the standard ballad, not as objects of nostalgia or tradition-worship but simply as new terrain for exploring. Melody, beauty, and wit came back in style, yet not at the sacrifice of individual expressiveness. The original LP pressing is fatally flawed—too much reverb in the post-production. But AP’s LP goes back to the master-tapes, which were recorded by David Baker, and they sound terrific. Freeman’s tenor sax exudes a warm heft. You can hear, practically feel, the strings snap and the wood vibrate on Cecil McBee’s bass. Billy Hart’s trapset sizzles; only John Hick’s piano is a bit hooded. An AP gold CD falls short of the vinyl but still sounds very nice, and has four extra tracks, including a lovely “Lonnie’s Lament.”

Jimmy Giuffrè: *1961 [ECM/Speakers Corner 1438/39 849644-1].

A daring album in its day—actually two albums (titled *Fusion* and *Thesis*, neither of which makes much sense), recorded back to back in 1961 for Verve, combined and reissued on CD 40 years later by ECM, and now put on vinyl by Speakers Corner. The jazz clarinet, Giuffrè’s horn, was out of style at the time; a drummerless trio (Paul Bley on piano, Steve Swallow on bass) was unheard of. Some called it “chamber

jazz,” and the music does bear a classical trace, but it also swings in a quiet way, almost unnoticeably; the pulse insinuates its way into your senses, sort of like the curves of a late de Kooning painting. It’s unclear whether the LP was cut from analog or digital tapes, but the sound is full-bodied and just gorgeous.

Herbie Hancock: *The Piano* [Sony (Japan) 30AP-1033 (direct-to-disc)].

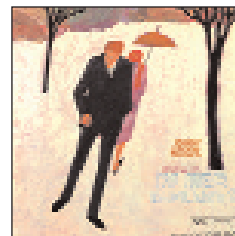
During a 1978 concert tour in Japan, pianist Herbie Hancock stepped into Sony’s studio, played two sides’ worth of solo ballads, each non-stop, while a cutting lathe carved the sounds directly to disc. There’s a soft, even ethereal intensity to this music; you can zone out to it or listen very closely, and get deep satisfaction either way. The piano’s too wide (the result of close miking?), but its tones and overtones hit the spot. Columbia recently released a CD, mastered from the back-up digital tapes. It sounds fine, but nothing like this. I’m told the original plates still exist in Sony’s Tokyo vaults. Some audiophile company should license them and make a new batch of D2D LPs.

Earl Hines: “Fatha!” [M&K RealTime RT-105 (direct-to-disc)].

It’s a kick to hear “Fatha” Hines, the king of stride piano, joined by bass and drums, strutting and galloping his way

through modernist tunes by Monk and Zawinul, as well as classics by Ellington and others, never abandoning his playful pizzazz. M&K’s direct-to-disc sound is just as fiery and immediate as on the label’s Duke tribute.

Johnny Hodges: *Blues-a-Plenty* [Verve/Classic MGVS-68358].



A luscious 1958 album with Hodges’ also joined by a half-dozen others from Ellington’s band and elsewhere (Billy Strayhorn, Roy Eldridge, Ben Webster, Jimmy Woode, Sam Woodward). There’s a little too much reverb on the horns, but saxes sound so creamy and the rest of the band so crisp, it’s hardly noticed. Hodges’ solo on “Gone With the Wind” is eye-rollingly silky.

Billie Holiday: *Songs for Distingué Lovers* [Verve/Speakers Corner/Analogue Prod. MG-VS-6021 (and 45rpm)].

Recorded in 1957, this album doesn’t find Billie in her finest voice, but she still had a commanding way of singing a story and knew how to swing with the band—which, in this case, included Ben Webster, Roy Eldridge, and Barney Kessel. The sound is

lively, reverberant, and bright—in a good way.

Illinois Jacquet: *Birthday Party* [Groove Note GRV-1003-1].

This is an album of bizarre provenance. At a 1972 Tokyo jazz festival, a rich music lover offers Illinois Jacquet a recording session if it includes “The Shadow of Your Smile.” The rousing Texas tenor rounds up some pals (Gerry Mulligan, Roy Haynes, Art Farmer, Kenny Burrell, others) and they make an album. The session started at 2 a.m., after a night of playing. They sound tired, but in a

casually swaying way, except during the blues, when they perk up and wail. There are no engineering credits, but the sound quality is just amazing. Jacquet has never been heard in such knock-me-down presence. Bernie Grundman did the mastering for Groove Note, which also issued it on CD.

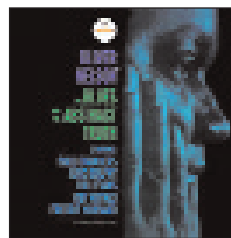
Charles Mingus: **Tijuana Moods* [RCA/Classic LSP-2533 (and 45rpm)].

Maybe Mingus’ liveliest album, featuring his great late-’50s septet, it roars with Latin rhythms, crisscrossing melodic lines, dark harmonies,

and the customary killing bass line. The sound is as natural and vivid as any Living Stereo jazz album. It was recorded in 1957 but not released until ’62, and then in truncated form. Many years later, RCA put out a CD of the complete session, but alas the sound—like many digital RCAs of the ’90s—was dreadful. Maybe RCA (or someone) should try again.

Oliver Nelson: **Blues and the Abstract Truth* [Impulse! A-5].

This 1961 session is a classic: equal parts cerebral and swinging,



earthy and lyrical, a string of stunning solos and lush ensemble harmonies. Consider the band: Nelson on alto sax; Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Eric Dolphy, flute; Bill Evans, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Roy Haynes, drums—and the results exceed the possibilities. It may also be engineer Van Gelder’s peak triumph. Each instrument is captured in

its true tone, and when they all play together, the crisscrossing overtones blossom in the ambience. There are reissues, but they pale before the original orange-label pressing.

Newport Rebels. [Candid/Pure Pleasure Records 9022].

In 1960, Charles Mingus organized a group of musicians who were annoyed by the growing commercialization of the Newport Jazz Festival, and put on a simultaneously held alternative festival. The Newport Rebels, the group was called, and a few months later, he brought some of the

musicians into the studio. The band included not just young avant-gardists (Mingus, Eric Dolphy, Booker Little, on one track Abbey Lincoln) but older traditionalists (Roy Eldridge, Tommy Flanagan, Jo Jones), and the mix was sensational. They played nothing very rebellious by the day's standards, mainly blues, but they all played with tight, boisterous joy. Eldridge especially cooks! The sound has that live excitement. When Lincoln sings, she's not hyped upfront; she seems a part of the band, and her voice breathes through the ensemble. Pure Pleasure is a new label (distributed in the

U.S. by Analogue Productions), and this is a splendid reissue. Compared with the original, it lacks a smidgen of air, and the bass is a bit less distinct; but it's otherwise better and the pressing is exceptionally clean.

Art Pepper: *Meets the Rhythm Section* [Contemporary/Analogue Prod. 7532 (and 45rpm)].

A blazing 1957 session with the West Coast alto saxophonist Art Pepper, at the height of his fluency, joining up with Miles Davis' rhythm section of the day (Red Garland, Paul Chambers, and Philly Joe Jones). The band



rips through the sheets in a way we don't hear on the pressure-cooking Miles sessions. Roy DuNann's minimalist miking yields an eerily realistic sound. The sounds burst out of your speakers, yet lay back when they're supposed to, too. Get either the original black-label pressing or the 45rpm.

Sonny Rollins: **Our Man in Jazz* [RCA/Classic

LSP-2612 (and 45rpm)]; **Way Out West* [Contemporary/Analogue Prod. S-7530 (and 45rpm) or Stereo Records S-7017]; *Music from the Score "Alfie"* [Impulse! A-9111].

Sonny Rollins remains the most brilliant improviser in jazz, but you wouldn't know it from most of the albums he's made during the past 30 years. See him live. Or pick up these LPs, recorded between 1957 and '66, the peak of the classic stereo era. *Our Man*, cut live at the Village Gate in '62, finds Rollins in his most experimental phase, heading a pianoless

quartet with Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, the trumpeter and drummer from Ornette Coleman's revolutionary band. It's one of the most thrilling jazz albums ever made, a ceaseless succession of tension and resolution. It may also be the most you-are-there live jazz album; you can practically see the brass outlines of Rollins' tenor, the peculiar shape of Cherry's pocket trumpet, the shimmer of Higgins' drumkit, the shape of the bandstand where each musician is standing. Hypnotic. *Way Out West* is a pianoless trio—another va-vivid Roy DuNann pro-

duction—with Rollins spinning quirky geometric patterns through odd standards like “I’m an Old Cow Hand.” The *Alfie* soundtrack should be better known: lovely balladry, great rhythm section, Oliver Nelson arrangements, and a tightly booming big-band sound. (A note regarding *Way Out West*’s catalogue number. Contemporary used to call its jazz label “Stereo Records,” until the RIAA protested; Stereo S-7017 was the first pressing. Subsequent pressings, which otherwise look the same and sound nearly the same, are marked S-7530.)

Sonny Stitt: *Atlas Blues “Blow! & Ballade” [Atlas (Japan) LA27-1007].

This is really an Art Pepper date, with Stitt heading the ticket to avoid contract violations, with the two alto men—playing together for the first time—gloriously trading fours on extended blues and taking turns fronting slow ballads. Part of this album is included in an Art Pepper CD box set on Fantasy, *The Hollywood All-Star Sessions*, but omitted are the ballads with Stitt soloing (gorgeous takes of “Autumn in New York” and “Lover Man”). Also, the sound quality is not nearly as luscious

as on this vinyl pressing. (The Japanese package also includes diagrams of where all the musicians were sitting and what microphones were used.) Hard to find, but worth the chase.

Lew Tabackin: *Trackin’* [RCA (Japan) RDC-3 (direct-to-disc, 45rpm)].

The music on this 1976 quartet session is nothing special, though it’s fine in a gentle head-swaying way, featuring Tabackin on flute and tenor sax; Toshiko Akiyoshi, piano; Bob Dougherty, bass; Shelly Manne, drums. The sound, though, smacks you on the head. It’s one of the

three or four most “live”-sounding jazz albums ever made. It’s also very hard to find. (I bought mine at Tower Records in the mid ’80s, on sale for \$1.99.) Notice: It was pressed at 45rpm and direct-to-disc. Can’t Classic or Analogue Productions try to get the licensing rights and plates?

Ben Webster & “Sweets” Edison: *Ben and “Sweets”* [Columbia/Classic CS-8691 (and 45rpm)].

This is a delightful album, Ben Webster’s rich tenor sax, with its deep register and sonorous vibrato, cruising through standards with Harry

“Sweets” Edison’s plangent trumpet, backed by the exceptionally tasty combo of Hank Jones, piano; George Duvivier, bass; and the underrated Clarence Johnston, drums. This is another classic Columbia, recorded at its sumptuously wood-paneled 30th Street Studio, which so warmly encased all those reverberant sounds. The highlight is Edison’s solo on “Embraceable You,” a startlingly modern trek with harmonies and intervals that seem closer to Ornette-style avant-garde than to Sweets’ swing-era roots. An album for big ears to bask in. 