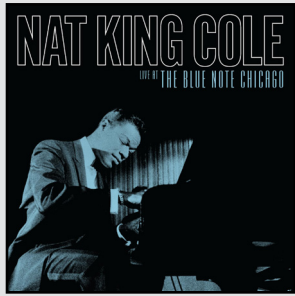


DROP THE NEEDLE



Live At The Blue Note Chicago
Nat King Cole (Iconic Artists Group)
by Marilyn Lester

In a world full of unsung heroes, Frank Holzfeind (1899-1975), who ran the now legendary Blue Note Chicago from 1947-60, is surely one of them. With a Chicago-made Webcor reel-to-reel player wired to the stage, he recorded many of the club's shows, including ten hours of Nat King Cole's six-day residency in 1953. *Live At The Blue Note Chicago* features restored audio from the original tapes (owned by the Holzfeind family), available as a double-LP lacquered and pressed on 180-gr vinyl (as well as a two-CD set and on streaming platforms). The LPs come with a double-

gatefold tip-on jacket with extensive liner notes, a six page booklet with photos of Cole in Chicago (where the pianist-singer grew up) and a copy of the original Blue Note Chicago newsletter about his visit. When fame hit, Cole didn't perform many live gigs, making this release, at the very least, incredibly special as cultural and musical history.

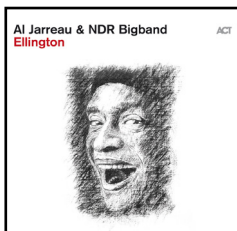
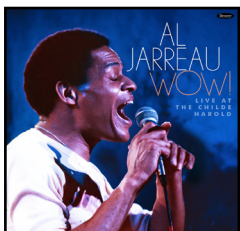
His original career goal was to be a jazz pianist. But when he formed The King Cole Trio in the late '30s, with guitarist Oscar Moore and bassist Wesley Prince, singing, as Cole himself once put it, kind of happened. The Trio became successful from the start. By the mid '40s, Cole had an exclusive contract with Capitol Records, which emphasized Cole the crooner at the expense of the jazz man. By 1953, that fate was sealed, all the more reason to celebrate the Chicago Blue Note sessions, which expanded the trio by plus one in drummer Lee Young—with John Collins (guitar) and Charlie Harris (bass). For a taste of pre-Capitol commercialism, there's "Little Girl", an absolute barn-burner version of the 1931 tea dance original, which clearly reveals the leader to be a gifted jazz pianist. Among the many ballads and the big hits, there are gems such as the acapella-drums version of "Calypso Blues", a novelty song with a humorous

laundry list of America's "failings." As with The Trio's first big hit, 1943's "Straighten Up and Fly Right", Cole proved himself a master of irony and satire. The gig's playful version of "Route 66" also offered fun, with Cole showing off pianistic skills and creatively inserting quotes such as riffs from a Scottish jig and a seafaring ditty. There's also playful interaction with an enthralled audience, happy to sing along with the lyric "route 66."

What rises to the top of this excellently curated album is Cole's charm and elegance, very much in the manner of Duke Ellington. *Live At The Blue Note Chicago* reveals a personal Cole, in sync with his audience, willing to be vulnerable and so fine-tuned to lyrics that every song is deeply meaningful. His reading of "Nature Boy" is a holy sermon; the pain of "Funny (Not Much)" cuts to the quick of love's heartbreak, and the uplift of "Too Marvelous for Words" is sheer joy.

Live At The Blue Note Chicago fully explains the success and popularity of an artist whose career was too soon ended 60 years ago this month at age 45 (from lung cancer). It's pure treasure.

For more info visit natkingcole.com



WOW!
Al Jarreau (Resonance)
Ellington
Al Jarreau & NDR Big Band (ACT Music)
by Anna Steegmann

Suppose you have never experienced the unparalleled thrill of attending a live concert by singer-songwriter Al Jarreau (who was born 85 years ago this March, and passed away 8 years ago this month at age 76.) Both of these previously unreleased albums will make up for it: *WOW!* at the beginning and *Ellington* at the end of his career.

The former is the definitive jazz album. Jarreau had just released two albums when he performed at a small venue in Washington, D.C. in 1976. For *WOW!*, he teamed up with Tom Canning (Fender Rhodes, electric piano, ARP string ensemble), Ben Atkins (bass) and Tom Drake (drums). Called an acrobat of scat and a human orchestra, Jarreau's ability to mimic instruments was exceptional. The opening of eleven tracks, "A Letter Perfect", showcases this remarkable versatility. He stretches his voice, elongates it, switches to speaking and goes into wild improvisational scatting. His humor, positive energy and excellent rapport with the audience always lit up a room. Leon Russell's "Rainbow in Your Eyes" is fast-paced, free-form, improvisational and electrifying. Jarreau takes the words and melody from James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" and made it his own. "Intro to Take Five" features his fierce, unaccompanied scatting; Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" is the most outstanding track. "Alladin's Lamp" and "Lock at the Gates" unmistakably showcase his soulful, spiritual side. "You Don't See Me" powerfully captures his experience as a young Black man who is unrecognized for doing the right thing. The song's stark and bittersweet message makes a lasting impression and, at almost nine minutes, leaves you eager for more.

Jarreau achieved worldwide fame, releasing over 20 albums and winning seven Grammy Awards in jazz,

pop and R&B. His rise to fame in Germany was sudden and dramatic, propelled by a 1975 live TV broadcast of his performance at a Hamburg club. This connection to NDR, a prominent radio and TV station, led 40 years later to *Ellington*, his collaboration with the NDR Big Band. The eleven tracks here were recorded during their 2016 European tour, just a few months before the singer's death. The opening, "Drop Me Off in Harlem" (lyric by Nick Kenny) is exuberant, sumptuous and swinging; Jarreau is at his scatting best. His voice shines in Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life", especially in parts where he's only accompanied by piano. He transforms another Strayhorn standard, "Take the 'A' Train" (lyric attributed to Joya Sherill), into a fresh new experience. "Sophisticated Lady" (lyric by Mitchell Parish) showcases his most seductive voice. "I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues" (lyric by Don George) is energetic and rollicking. Every track captures the vocalist's mesmerizing stage presence, whether singing ballads or songs with more of a blues, R&B or pop feeling.

Both albums are available as digital downloads, as double-LP or CD sets. Buy both, open a bottle of Jarreau's favorite wine, Mouton Cadet, and be riveted by the genius of his talent.

For more info visit resonancerecords.org and actmusic.com



The Music of Max Roach
Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra
with Wynton Marsalis (Blue Engine)
by Phil Freeman

Drummer Max Roach had an extraordinary career but his work as a composer may have gone overlooked by comparison. The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JLCO), principally with drummer Obed Calvaire, attempted to redress that wrong with this album, *The*

Music of Max Roach, recorded live at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater in January 2024. One of the drummers present at the founding of bebop, Roach's hard, aggressive swing and ability to make the drums a melodic instrument helped define jazz' future in the '40s and beyond. In the '50s, alongside trumpeter Clifford Brown, he made intricate, high-energy, and perhaps most importantly, *beautiful* hard bop. After Brown's early death, Roach traveled in numerous directions, continually expanding the parameters of jazz by recording explicitly political works, collaborating with avant-gardists like Anthony Braxton and Cecil Taylor, establishing the percussion ensemble M'Boom and playing with string quartets, among other projects. His drumming has been revered and influential.

The JLCO, 15 members strong—five reeds, four trumpets (including leader Wynton Marsalis), three trombones, piano, bass and drums (Calvaire)—is here augmented by lead vocalist Shenel Johns and the six-member Chorale Le Chateau, led by chorus master Damien Sneed. The repertoire for the performance was chosen by Calvaire, who also contributed the final composition of the night. Naturally, given JLCO's generally retro leanings, the focus is on Roach's work from the early '60s with versions of pieces from albums such as *Drums Unlimited*, *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, *It's Time* and the landmark *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*. Calvaire calls out players who have solos: Sherman Irby (alto), Elliot Mason (trombone), Carlos Henriquez (bass) and presents his own features on "The Drum Also Waltzes" and "Conversation", capturing the simmering tension at the heart of Roach's music and personality. Johns' lead vocal on "Driva' Man" (Max Roach, Oscar Brown, Jr.) trades Abbey Lincoln's blood-in-the-eyes fury for Broadway-style excess, while the instrumental backing blends Ellingtonian grandeur with the deep-in-the-jungle wails of John Coltrane's "Africa", with a tenor saxophone solo by Abdias Armenteros that is both stark and soulful. The closer, Calvaire's "Between Max and Ti-Roro", is a ferocious Latin jazz workout that brings everything to a thunderous climax, helping to make this tribute worthy of its subject.

For more info visit jazz.org. A Max Roach tribute is at 92NY Feb. 21 (featuring Tyshawn Sorey Trio + Sandbox Percussion). Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra is at Rose Theater Feb. 2-7 and Feb. 28-Mar. 1. See Calendar.