

# Standard Definition

How often can jazz vocalists return to the same barrel of Great American Songbook standards before we all hear the ladle scrape the bottom? Some singers insist that there is no expiration date on the songs of their parents—and often grandparents’—generation and strive to find new reasons for reviving the songs of Harold Arlen, Duke Ellington, Jerome Kern and the like. Others, following the example of Cassandra Wilson, are mixing post-Elvis pop standards in with pre-Elvis jazz standards. Each singer has a different recipe for the right mix, as if jazz vocals had suddenly become a cooking contest. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

**Alicia Olatuja** serves up four originals, a handful of

r&b hits, a Brazilian song, an Arlen standard and “Amazing Grace” on her debut solo album, **Timeless (World Tune; 50:11 ★★★★★)**. Best known for her solo with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Gospel Choir during Obama’s 2013 inauguration, Olatuja possesses a special instrument: a full-bodied tone, precise pitch and personal engagement at the lowest whisper or highest wail. Olatuja consistently connects with the listener, from the slo-mo deconstruction of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” to the eloquent scat syllables of her own “Truth In Blue.” Her jazz-informed alterations of melody and rhythm are reinforced by musicians such as Christian McBride, Jon Cowherd, drummer/co-producer Ulysses Owens Jr. and husband/bassist/co-producer Michael Olatuja.

**Ordering info:** [itunes.com](http://itunes.com)

Minneapolis fixture **Connie Evingson** largely sticks to the Great American Songbook on her 10th album, **All The Cats Join In (Minnehaha 2010; 55:43 ★★★★★)**, but she throws in tunes from Paul McCartney and Parisian neo-cabaret singer Keren Ann. Evingson doesn’t have a big voice, but her tone is so playful and her phrasing so slippery that she quickly disarms the listener. This project is her first studio collaboration with the John Jorgenson Quintet, whose leader is an admirable Django Reinhardt disciple. Reinhardt’s 1930s gypsy approach to swing gives everything from Arlen’s “Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea” to Paul McCartney’s “I’ll Follow The Sun” a unified feel.

**Ordering info:** [connieevingson.com](http://connieevingson.com)

**Cynthia Felton** gives herself over to the past on her new tribute album, **Save Your Love For Me: Cynthia Felton Sings the Nancy Wilson Classics (Felton 0004; 46:52 ★)**. Felton recorded the old spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and 10 tunes from Wilson’s catalog in the same Capitol Studios where Wilson made her pop-jazz gems half



Alicia Olatuja

CARSTEN FLECK

a century ago. Felton has a bigger, more piercing voice than her hero, but that becomes a liability rather than an asset. She overstates song after song with showy vocal acrobatics and heart-tugging melodrama that are diametrically opposed to the understated charm of Wilson’s originals. Felton has hired top musicians such as Cyrus Chestnut, Wallace Roney and Jeff “Tain” Watts for these sessions, but their subtlety is repeatedly undone by her diva-itis.

**Ordering info:** [cynthiafelton.com](http://cynthiafelton.com)

**Anna Wilson**, a Nashville songwriter whose tunes have been recorded by country stars such as Reba McEntire and Lee Ann Womack, is a jazz and pop fan as well, and she showcases those latter interests on her new album, **Jazzbird/Songbird (Transfer; 44:05 ★★)**. She divides the disc in two. The first half, named after the Gershwin tune “Little Jazzbird,” emphasizes Wilson’s jazz side. The second half, named after Fleetwood Mac’s “Songbird,” showcases her pop leanings. The distinction is not as sharp as she may have thought. Wilson’s singing, like her songwriting, is competent without being exceptional and the whole affair is pleasant without being memorable.

**Ordering info:** [annawilson.com](http://annawilson.com)

The Toronto singer **Kiran Ahluwalia** has long sought a bridge between her love of North American jazz and her passion for South Asian music. On her new album, **Sanata: Stillness (Magenta 930; 47:49 ★★½)**, she has constructed that span with unexpected materials: the Tuareg desert-rock of Tinariwen. This works better than you might think, because the music from Saharan Mali echoes both the drones of South Asian classical music and the rhythmic vamps of hard-bop. Ahluwalia’s husband/producer, Rez Abbasi, transmutes the desert guitar licks into smart jazz solos.

**Ordering info:** [kiranmusic.com](http://kiranmusic.com)

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## Sam Newsome *The Straight Horn Of Africa: A Path To Liberation (The Art Of The Soprano Vol. 2)*

SELF PRODUCED

★★★★½

Sam Newsome once had aspirations as a comic and played bop tenor on Criss Cross and Steeplechase sessions. That’s hard to believe, given his current attention to the physiology of the soprano sax. In exhaustive liners, ethnomusicologist Dr. Charles D. Carson quotes Newsome collaborator Francisco Mora Catlett’s assertion that it is quintessentially African to inquire, “What else is there to this? Where can we go from here?” Such curiosity called Newsome to telescope his solo explorations.

Newsome’s taxonomical approach, sprouting from the influence of Steve Lacy but also Anthony Braxton, is meditative and distinct. There is strength to Newsome’s stance, nothing rushed or bravura. “The Obama Song ...” is a stunning soundscape: Multi-tracked sopranos seesaw above and below a metronomic 7/4 rhythm that alternates with an offbeat midrange multiphonic. Amid the sonic puzzle emerges, eventually, a lovely melody.

The drolly titled “Good Golly Miss Mali” approximates the kora through slap-tonguing on a saxophone reed. “N.D. Nile” is a welcome incidence of more fluid lines, but reviewers should be forgiven for mistaking this for “The Snake Charmer of Tangier,” which is omitted from track listing. The latter evocatively deploys subtle detuning of what appears to be a number of individual, overdubbed sopranos, melding with an improvisation based on a specific *maqam*, the melodic modes used in Arabic music. Take care to listen in a state of focus; Newsome’s experiments don’t function well as background music.

—Michael Jackson

**The Straight Horn Of Africa:** Echos From Mount Kilimanjaro; The Straight Horn Of Africa; Explanations Of An African Horn: Part 1; The Obama Song; The Man From Kenya; Ethiopian Jews; Explorations Of An African Horn: Part 2; N.D. Nile; The Snake Charmer Of Tangier; Microtonal Nubian Horn: Part 1; Good Golly Miss Mali; African Conundrum; Sounds Of Somalia; When The Drum Speaks; Microtonal Nubian Horn, Part 2; Dark Continent Dialogues; African Nomads; Microtonal Nubian Horn: Part 3; Nightfall On The Owani Desert; The Day And Life Of A Hunter Gatherer; Microtonal Nubian Horn, Part 4; Highlife. (51:13).

**Personnel:** Sam Newsome, soprano saxophones.

**Ordering info:** [samnewsome.com](http://samnewsome.com)