

HOME PAST COLUMNS ABOUT

Sound Advice

A personal Top Ten of 2014 vocal albums

[Also see Rob's list of the Top Ten Cast Albums of 2014](#)

From those submitted for review this year, here is an honor roll of the ones I find myself wanting to return to and which seem richer and more appreciated with repeat plays. The ten CDs on the list are not ranked in order of preference; they are alphabetical by last name of the artist, with two items with various artists at the end.



JOYCE BREACH
WITH MIKE RENZI (PIANO)
MOMENTS LIKE THIS
 Not previously reviewed

A new album by Joyce Breach, who came to New York City from Pittsburgh almost 20 years ago, is always something to look forward to. Like another jewel in a crown, her knowing and rewarding work is special in its smart choices and blessed lack of artifice. In *Moments Like This*, as in previous moments in recording studios, she is *in* the moment, getting to the heart of a song with sincerity and affection. She lets them live and breathe and doesn't make it about weeping and wailing. With excellent taste in all things musical, her choice of song is often an underappreciated one or a standard neglected in recent years. Also known for working with the finest of classy jazz-leaning musicians, her collaboration here with the masterful pianist Mike Renzi takes things to a truly exquisite level. There's delicacy, there's integrity, there's depth.

A few numbers here have had the Breach touch before, but her interpretations are always fresh and involved. This time around, she picks up a few pieces that were the property of two of the much-missed female song stylists who also worked with Renzi: the legendary Peggy Lee and gossamer-voiced Blossom Dearie (who co-wrote the choices here). Welcome material includes the adorable novelty number "(There Ought to Be a) Moonlight Savings Time" and the true heartbreaker, "I'll Only Miss Him When I Think of Him," from the Jimmy Van Heusen/Sammy Cahn score to Broadway's mid-1960s musical *Skyscraper*. A master class in classy singing and respecting/trusting the material, this Joyce Breach recital is highly recommended.

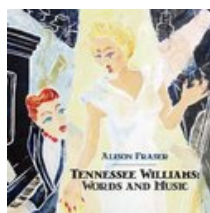


LIANNE MARIE DOBBS
EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN
 Not previously reviewed

The bright-voiced Lianne Marie Dobbs first came to my instant attention in person when she sashayed into a Manhattan cabaret for their annual singing contest, a vision in gingham, with a retro sound that felt informed and affectionate. She was accompanied by Bill Zeffiro, one of the city's ubiquitous music men, a multiple MAC Award winner for his savvy musical direction skills as well as his original songs. He's with her here, just the two of them, and that's just swell. The appropriately titled debut album for this old soul kind of a sunny singer —*Everything Old Is New Again*—is pure pleasure from beginning to end. The only disappointment is: that start-to-finish time clocked is lamentably brief, with just eight titles (two in a medley). But the quantity-challenged factor is offset by a particularly disarming and consistent performance.

Rather than projecting any kind of forced or winking evocation of earlier eras, the breezy

and graceful approach makes this a genuine winner that feels peaches-and-cream natural. But it's not just a pretty sound with a terrific arranger-pianist—there's warmth and intelligence here. These two *understand* songs. Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's 1939 classic "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" hits both the romantic and wistful marks and becomes a satisfying, believable story of hope and idyllic life that is grounded in determined possibility. Kander and Ebb's rarely approached "Plenty of Time" about regrets for opportunities passed by is filled with feeling without pushing buttons or getting mawkish. Instead, the lady's experience as an actress is employed to full advantage and characters are painted. The title song, the Peter Allen standby, sums things up rather nicely—combine that with "Seems Like Old Times" crystallizing the nostalgic mood and it's a memory lane with one high-heeled foot firmly placed in the present. Lianne *does* make the oldies ring true and new and sweet as pie.



ALISON FRASER

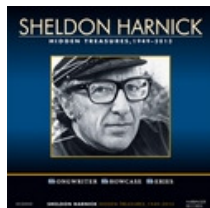
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: WORDS AND MUSIC

Original review

Talk about your perfect casting! Actress Alison Fraser combines her distinctive voice, both singing and in spoken monologues, to bring us a full and varied world populated with playwright Tennessee

Williams' characters. Honeysuckle-drenched Southern accent in place, the ladies come to life, with all the yearning and fragility we've known when visiting the writer's created environments. Based on a live stage show the skilled artist has presented, this is not just an easy-choice mix of the most mythic and famous characters and speeches you'd find on the tip of the Williams iceberg. As companions to the dramatic realizations are songs associated with the writer's plays, sometimes having been excerpted in them, or at least referenced. Languid affect and dreamy pictures are projected and cling. From "Sweet Leilani" to "Yellow Dog Blues" to "Bye Bye Blues," elusive hopes rise and fall and are renewed.

This very intimate and very human recital is artful and captivating—a decidedly unusual release that is thoroughly theatrical through and through.



SHELDON HARNICK & OTHERS

HIDDEN TREASURES

Harbinger Records

Original review

Himself a living treasure, this career-spanning audio scrapbook of the work of Sheldon Harnick is a true joy. Its contents: demos,

career highlights from hit shows with frequent collaborator Jerry Bock (heard on some tracks playing/singing) and others, and (most intriguingly) souvenirs from proposed projects that never came to fruition. "Leftovers" never tasted so much like a banquet! You'll hear the voices of strong-personality singers, including some more recent work by Audra McDonald and Brian d'Arcy James (one number each) and the lyricist himself (a much more capable and comfortable singer than many songwriters) and his ever-delightful wife, performer Margery Grey. While a fair number of tracks have been previously released in these versions—oddly unmentioned/uncredited here—even discounting that, this *Hidden Treasure* chest would make the list. It's a two-disc set, so there's plenty that's uncommon and uncommonly wonderful. And the fact-filled, lyric-filled thick booklet is an education in itself. Avid musical theatre fans and those of us who wonder about orphan songs from abandoned projects will do cartwheels for releases like this.



MARK JENNETT

EVERYBODY SAYS DON'T

Original review

A versatile male singer with a particularly gutsy and sensitive way of approaching material (those methods are not mutually exclusive),

Mark Jennett is superb on *Everybody Says Don't*, named for the Stephen Sondheim feisty declaration of independent thinking from *Anyone Can Whistle*. It's just one of many strong tracks—some from excellent Broadway scores—that are excitingly emotional and truly "owned." He goes his own way, but somehow always gets back to the center of the song. *South Pacific*'s "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" has laser-beam focus and is unsettling—as it should be. This vocalist based in London gets deep into lyrics and music, but not in the by-the-book character way. They are infused with a simmering passion that mixes dramatic tension/release with jazz sensibilities. He seems incapable of being pat or corny, whether with a brooding Broadway anthem or taking a Burt Bacharach/Hal David nugget and making it thoughtful without getting heavy-handed. This guy is no sound-alike clone. He is his own man. And his own work is dynamite.



SHIRLEY JONES & JACK CASSIDY

MARRIAGE TYPE LOVE

Sony Masterworks

Original review

If I'd been around reviewing albums in 1959, my Top Ten of the Year might have included Shirley Jones and Jack Cassidy's *Marriage Type Love*, and maybe I'd even suggest that the female half of this married couple would be great casting if they ever make a film version of the recent Grammy winner for best recording of a musical score, *The Music Man*. But this album actually couldn't have made that list in 1959, when it was set to be released, because it never was released—until 2014. That seems a pity, because it's a marvelous set of a dozen tracks with of the creamiest voices to greet our ears in any decade. Sometimes everything old *is* new again, so a first-time release is a first-time release. Cozy and lush, with a dash of playfulness, it's full of excellent songs, some from Broadway shows: Representing Richard Rodgers—such a crucial presence throughout the Jones career, and saluted in her solo album in this decade—are the title song from Rodgers & Hart's *I Married an Angel* and the album's own title song from Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Me and Juliet*. Other musical theatre items are "Love Is the Reason" from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, "My Darling, My Darling" from *Where's Charley?*, and "I Love You" from *Mexican Hayride*. There are solos among the duets and things are kept light and happy, as if this couple, wed three years earlier, were wearing rose-colored glasses 24/7. Thank goodness for recordings that capture music and energy and sweetness forever fresh.



BARBRA STREISAND

PARTNERS

Columbia Records (Sony)

Not previously reviewed

My review copy of Barbra Streisand's colorful collection of duets with male stars came late, well after the initial hoopla, with an apology. I'd already heard all the tracks, knew it was a no-brainer to include here, so I thought I'd just wait til now. Much has been said. It's one more high water mark in a remarkable recording career. Conceived as a retrospective of some of her hits, this time sharing the spotlight, it's inevitably full of numbers we've heard over and over, due to her many live albums since she began, with much of this repertoire oh-so familiar, as are the original arrangements and stylings. But these are largely rethought and refreshed, the phrasing being shaken up with new tempi and instrumentations. And the Streisand voice is in stunning shape, seeming more vital with this album that is not as heavily laden with slow, snuggly ballads as some recent efforts have favored.

Like the two albums of duets Frank Sinatra released, it's a shrewd mix of veterans (Stevie Wonder making the signature song "People" funkier and loose) and men more recently arrived on the music scene, such as Josh Groban on "Somewhere." These two numbers which originated on Broadway are just two to relish. And, indeed, there are songs new to

the Streisand repertoire and one from her early years, "It Had to Be You," so radically different in approach (a fun blast of a big band swinger with Michael Bublé) that it's new with an asterisk. Like in her recent concert appearances, the duet of Irving Berlin's "How Deep Is the Ocean (How High Is the Sky)" is a historic combination with her own son, Jason Gould, suddenly bursting out on his own as an affecting and emotional singer after all these years. (He sang it as a solo on his own EP.) While sometimes glossy, the *Partners* album is glorious and rich. (The standard edition was submitted for review by Sony, but there is a bonus duet track with producer Babyface, "Lost Inside of You," on versions for sale in some outlets, and a "deluxe" variation recycles a few other duets from years past.)

With John Mayer, John Legend, and Billy Joel among the leading men, and Barbra Streisand reclaiming her hits and magic, this album is stirring time spent among the stars.



KELLEY SUTTENFIELD & TONY ROMANO

AMONG THE STARS

Original review

The combination of vocalist Kelly Sutfenfield and guitarist Tony Romano is forged in musical heaven. Moody and mesmerizing, it is free of tricks and stunts. Spare and supple, their work cuts to the core of each well-chosen, mature romantic song. The environment they create is so addictive, I seem to have become incapable of moving on to another disc each time *Among the Stars* slips into my CD player and consciousness. It all feels so natural, the phrasing that allows one statement to melt into the next, the two supporting each other, listening to each other, complementing each other in this musical mutually reactive conversation. And the song selection is classy and tasty. Also notable is the way the arrangements and tempi deepen light far without wearing it thin; "Fly Me to the Moon" returns to its roots as poetic expressions of reveling in devotion, and the pop hit "One Fine Day" grows up and is reinvented as a true ballad. *Oklahoma!*'s "People Will Say We're in Love" is absent any coy cuteness. With Valentine's Day around the corner, I can't think of a better recommendation for a loving and lovely listen.



NICE FIGHTING YOU

AHRENS & FLAHERTY: A 30th ANNIVERSARY

CELEBRATION

LIVE AT 54 BELOW

VARIOUS BROADWAY PERFORMERS

Broadway Records

Original review

In a rather quickly-growing collection of albums recorded live at the midtown Manhattan nightclub 54 Below, the label Broadway Records brings the party home. *Nice Fighting You* celebrates three decades of the partnership of composer Stephen Flaherty and lyricist-bookwriter Lynn Ahrens. A cross-section of their oeuvre from early efforts to then-incoming *Rocky* makes for an entertaining and varied concert. Initially, I couldn't help but be disappointed that, for those who amass cast albums, there was more déjà vu than we'd hope for. We get a lot of the same songs in pretty much the same way we heard them before, sometimes by the same singers. But now I consider this generous collection for what it is, not focusing on that issue. It's quite a bevy of powerhouse and heartfelt performances by top talent. What we can consider the Ahrens/Flaherty masterwork, *Ragtime*, gets especially well represented in quantity and quality. And, yes, there are some rare items, too. The energy stays at a high level, material not showing any signs of being tired. The writers sing a bit, too, as well as host. With alumni like Liz Callaway and Bobby Steggert, this rejoicing reunion is a fine overview of a talented team.



VARIOUS ARTISTS

LOST BROADWAY AND MORE, VOLUME 6: JEROME KERN

Original Cast Records



Original review

Who can argue with a flood of little-known musical theatre songs by the man who was arguably the father of genre—Jerome Kern—and his various lyricist collaborators? It's one of those all-too-rare collections of true rarities (even to hard-core sleuths) that really "delivers" in terms of charm and historical import. The Kern gift for melody and lilt is always impressive and these mostly long-ignored little gems are invaluable. Since the man was prolific and his output was in the pre-longplaying record era, before full scores/cast albums were typical, so much that didn't catch on as independent songs fell through the cracks and stayed there. Original Cast Records' founder/producer Bruce Yeko brings together a roster of likeable singers with flair, among them Michael Lavine, who's also the pianist, musical director, and sheet music collector with perspective and a running start.

- Rob Lester

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