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Top 15 jazzy vocal albums of 2014: Get 'em while they're hot!



By: [Carol Banks Weber](#) AXS Contributor Dec 31, 2014 3 days ago
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The year 2014 produced so many outstanding jazz vocal albums, an annual *Top 10* seems downright Grinchy. So here are the *Top 15* to start with:

1. [Michael O'Neill](#) & [Kenny Washington](#)'s *New Beginnings* (September 16, 2014, Jazzmo Records)
2. [Catherine Russell](#)'s *Bring It Back* (February 11, 2014, Jazz Village/Harmonia Mundi)
3. [Barb Jungr](#)'s *Hard Rain* (March 24, 2014, Kristalyn Records)
4. [Jua](#)'s *Colors Of Life* (June 24, 2014, Chocolate Chi Music)
5. [Melanie De Biasio](#)'s *No Deal* (March 24, 2014, PIAS)
6. [Kavita Shah](#)'s *Visions* (May 27, 2014, Inner Circle)
7. [Cyrille Aimée](#)'s *It's A Good Day* (August 19, 2014, [Mack Avenue Records](#))
8. [Kelley Suttentfield](#)'s *Among The Stars* (September 30, 2014)
9. [Gian-Carla Tisera](#)'s *Nora la Bella* (August 19, 2014, Rebeliosa Music)
10. [Somi](#)'s *The Lagos Music Salon* (August 5, 2014, [OKeh](#))
11. [Carsie Blanton](#)'s *Not Old, Not New* (June 24, 2014)
12. [Allison Adams Tucker](#)'s *April In Paris* (June 3, 2014)
13. [Brand New Heavies](#)' *Sweet Freaks* (November 24, 2014, Eagle Rock)
14. [Freda Payne](#)'s *Come Back To Me Love* (July 22, 2014, Artistry)
15. [Magos Herrera](#) & [Javier Limón](#)'s *Dawn* (June 3, 2014, OKeh)

Five in particular deserve more attention.

- 5. Michael O'Neill and Kenny Washington's 'New Beginnings'



NASA/JPL-Caltech/Harvard-Smithsonian CfA

[Michael O'Neill](#) Sextet featuring [Kenny Washington](#) *New Beginnings* • September 16, 2014 • Jazzmo Records

Usually the ladies capture the majority of the attention in any jazz vocal recording, and there is a fair share of them. But the men represented solidly as well this year. Saxophonist Michael O'Neill and his Sextet bring out the difference in Bay Area vocalist Kenny Washington's soulful tones on a number of startlingly new-sounding covers from the Great American Songbook that is anything but staid. Washington is a fantastically fluid and inventive singer who's kept mostly to projects he's held dear in and around the Bay Area, with occasional forays into small but important jazz festivals. He's partnered with O'Neill on gigs and two previous key releases with a Sextet, *The Long And The Short Of It* and *Still Dancin'*, so these two are well-versed in a wide variety of songs. With O'Neill's ability to see through to the soul of a singer in the personalized arrangements and his Sextet's extrapolative dance incorporating the vocalist's lead, and Washington's ability to bring out a different story and feel to the most familiar covers from the Great American

Songbook, this is a one-two punch nobody should miss. The Sextet includes some of the most thoughtful musicians in the area: trumpeter/flugelhornist [Erik Jekabson](#), drummer Alan Hall, conga player Christian Pepin, bassist [Dan Feiszli](#), and pianists [Geoffrey Keezer](#) and John R. Burr. What they do to “The Surrey With The Fringe On Top,” “Stella By Starlight,” and “A Night In Tunisia” is miraculous.

- 4. Barb Jungr's 'Hard Rain'



Steve Ullathorne

[Barb Jungr](#) *Hard Rain* • March 24, 2014 • [Kristalyn Records](#)

Eleven songs by Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen may be a little much, right? Not when this [British cabaret singer](#) gets through with the poignant, often seminal, soundtracks that once represented an entire generation of protest during times of struggle. Jungr handles the protest (“Blowin’ In The Wind,” “It’s Alright Ma,” “Who By Fire,” “First We Take Manhattan”) gracefully, adding her feminine touch and infinite compassion in vocals that never stray into hysteria or strident homily. She makes the listener feel the emotional ramifications of the social injustices, and keeps those themes relevant today. “I knew right from the start it was all the tougher songs of [Bob Dylan](#) and Leonard Cohen that I wanted to sing. I knew there was somehow a through thread to them — that the world they described and the actions they rejected and celebrated were of as much importance today as the day those songs were penned. There’s something in both writers that transcends the material itself, as though the words and music have powers beyond the paper and the groove, beyond the voice and the piano.” Right on.

- 3. Jua's 'Colors Of Life'



Roy Cox Photography

[Jua](#) *Colors Of Life* • June 24, 2014 • Chocolate Chi Music

Jua Howard used to be way into the neo-soul scene until he yearned for more. Then, he saw Nancy Wilson perform and something clicked. Howard dove deeply into some spectacular standards and a few of his own in the 10-track response, including Abbey Lincoln's "Bird Alone," Bill Withers' "Let Me Be The One," and Bob Dorough's "Love Came On Stealthy Fingers." The Chicago-born, Raleigh, NC-based [singer's R&B experience](#) lent soulful depth in the jazz phrasings, to set a mellow mood. His smooth intent makes allowances for the occasional multi-syllabic stumbles on the original compositions.

- 2. Melanie De Biasio's 'No Deal'



Photo courtesy of Melanie De Biasio

[Melanie De Biasio](#) *No Deal* • March 24, 2014 • PIAS

She's been called the Belgian Billie Holiday. She's way cooler than that. [Melanie De Biasio](#) came out with a seven-song bombshell last spring that had everyone talking about a new age of dark jazz. *Everyone. No Deal* is De Biasio's uncompromising vocal drop on the usual cutesy-pie theatrics of jazz ingénues and aging veterans coasting on antiquated standard fare. Her [music is all-original](#), slightly dangerous, and efficiently impactful. Her opening salvo, "[The Flow](#)," is a reawakening with short, cutting lyrics and a universal call to rethink, "How about a new way to pray." Nobody comes close. European music lovers already know about this godless goddess who's going on a massive [world tour](#) next month. The U.S. is just beginning the conversion.

- 1. Catherine Russell's 'Bring It Back'



Nancy Carbonaro

[Catherine Russell](#) *Bring It Back* • February 11, 2014 • [Jazz Village](#)/Harmonia Mundi

Known as one of [Steely Dan](#)'s backup singers, [Catherine Russell](#) moved quickly to the forefront with this solo album, her fifth. *Bring It Back* was Russell's love letter to her parents' big band, big jazz upbringing. The 13 songs feature Russell giving her sass to the music her famous parents loved, including her big bandleader father Luis' original "Lucille" track — meant for Louis Armstrong. She sings it for the first time on this album. But then she sings all of these songs she's reached back into the past to retrieve as if they've been sung for the first time.



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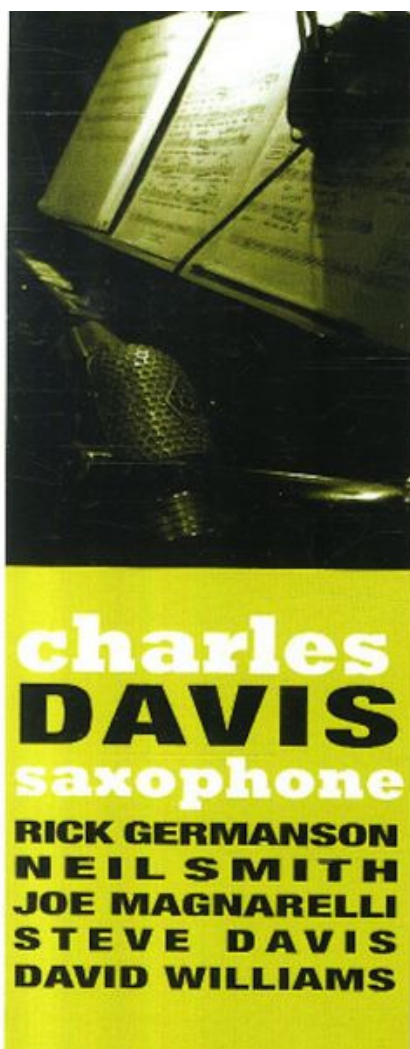
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