

Chicago Tribune



Best jazz holiday albums – a guide

Christmas music — you know, the tunes you hear incessantly in elevators and shopping malls each December — does not necessarily make for great jazz.

An art form predicated on originality and innovation, after all, does not easily conform to the predictable and the banal.

Yet this year a surprising number of artists have come up with seasonal releases that have something worthwhile to say. The best of these recordings either sidestep cliché or simply transcend the limitations of songs that may have worn out their welcome by this time of year.

Following are some of the more interesting offerings:

Ann Hampton Callaway: "The Hope of Christmas" (Manchester Craftsmen's Guild). In one of the brainier jazz projects of the holiday season, Callaway sings unfamiliar music linked by a common thread: all the lyrics are by William Schermerhorn. This means that Callaway, a superb jazz vocalist, performs tunes Schermerhorn penned with various composers, including Michael Feinstein and Callaway herself. One of the best works comes from the Feinstein-Schermerhorn partnership, a bit of a surprise considering that Feinstein remains best known as an interpreter and champion of other's people's songs. But "My Gift of Thanks" elegantly pairs Feinstein's yearning melody with Schermerhorn's heartfelt lyric. Callaway and Schermerhorn's "Fly with the Angels" provides a serene, hopeful close to an album that does not shy from openly emotional expression while respecting listeners' intelligence. Some of the instrumental accompaniment leans dangerously close to what some observers call "smooth jazz" (as if there were such a thing), and Callaway in some instances indulges in a bit too much vibrato. But these are minor flaws in a holiday album that tries to do something different — and succeeds.

By Howard Reich