



Exactly Right!
Louis Hayes (Savant)
by Ken Dryden

Louis Hayes is still going strong at the age of 84 and has long been among the top drummers, so it is fitting that he was recently named a NEA Jazz Master, an honor which was long overdue. In these late 2022 sessions, the drummer leads his superb regular working band, which also appeared on his prior Savant album, *Crisis*. Abraham Burton (tenor), David Hazeltine (piano), Steve Nelson (vibes) and Dezron Douglas (bass) are all veterans also at the top of their game. The music includes familiar bop and hard bop repertoire, along with lesser known works from past masters and new originals. The performances give the feeling that these songs have been played in clubs and that the musicians feel at ease with their challenges.

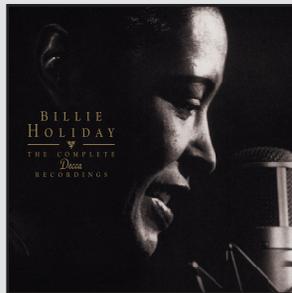
The breezy, explosive treatment of Cedar Walton's "Hand in Glove", a thinly disguised reworking of Cole Porter's "Love for Sale", is highlighted by Burton's searing tenor; a series of drum breaks by the leader wrap up the exciting arrangement. Hayes displays his mastery of brushes in the lush, deliberate setting of the Sérgio Mendes ballad "So Many Stars".

His strolling backbeat gives the late Wayne Shorter's exotic "Nefertiti" an entirely new perspective, Burton focusing on its theme as Hazeltine and Nelson interweave contrasting lines around it. Horace Silver's infrequently performed "Mellow D" is a nice surprise, yet the quintet's fresh approach breaks new ground while paying tribute to the pianist's prolific output as a composer. Fred Lacey's "Theme For Ernie" is a heartfelt, emotional ballad, savored at a slow tempo, featuring Burton's vocal-like tenor and Nelson's spacious, subtle vibes. The band's interpretation of

"Scarborough Fair" provides an interesting twist: they play it in a funky manner and alter the familiar melody so much that it is barely present. The closer is a romp through another Walton composition, "Ugetsu". The timeless piece, first recorded by Walton as pianist in Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers nearly 60 years ago wraps up the session with Hayes and his men firing on all cylinders.

For more info visit jazzdepot.com. This project is at Harlem Stage Apr. 21. See Calendar.

BOXED SET



The Complete Decca Recordings
Billie Holiday (Decca-Verve)
by Ori Dagan

Billie Holiday's days at Decca are fêted once again with this exclusive collector's edition 4-LP boxed set. Included here are all 36 master takes she recorded for the label between 1944 and 1950, plus additional versions, three alternate takes released for the first time and even some breakdown and chatter. The accompanying 20-page booklet offers priceless insight into the subtext of these historic recordings. All but one of the sessions were produced by Milt Gabler, who, in his day, was as influential in the recording industry as Holiday (born this month on April 7, 1915) still is in popular music.

Timing is everything. Following the recording of "Strange Fruit" on Gabler's Commodore label and the attention it garnered, he was able to offer Holiday a contract at Decca when he was hired there. It was important that she trusted him and that he respected her unique musical vision. Recording with a string section, for instance, was a dream come true for Holiday. For the most part, Gabler also chose excellent material and gave her a say in the repertoire.

He saw Holiday not as a jazz stylist but rather as a pop singer; as such, while not a single tempo is burning, there are plenty of torch songs here. One of her biggest commercial successes, "Lover Man", was recorded on the first Decca date in 1944, with a gorgeous string arrangement by Salvador "Toots" Camarata, who later went on to work for Walt Disney. Along with lyricist Bob Russell, Camarata also composed the brooding "No More", a highlight of this collection that Holiday considered one of her best performances.

Holiday cemented her status as a songwriter not with a plethora of originals, but with a handful which went far. Several of her co-writes with Arthur Herzog, Jr., appear here, including the magical "Don't Explain", arguably the best lyric she ever penned. It has been effectively covered by dozens of artists, though none could rival the original (Nina Simone came pretty close). A lesser-known Herzog collaboration, the sentimental "Somebody's On My Mind", is beautifully complemented by the Gordon Jenkins Orchestra.

One significant caveat regarding this collection is that in some cases, the arrangements are not as enduring as Holiday's performances. Vocal group The Stardusters are thankfully only present on two

selections (recorded December 10, 1948): Ralph Blane's outrageously dated "Girls Were Made to Take Care of Boys" and the cliché-ridden Jenkins-Adair "Weep No More", with a vocal arrangement so laughably bad it borders on parody. There must be a backstory to this debacle. It couldn't have been easy for Holiday to put up with these circumstances but miraculously, after The Stardusters left, that evening she recorded two of the most breathtaking cuts of her entire career: "I Loves You Porgy" and "My Man (Mon Homme)", with the stellar sensitivity of Bobby Tucker (piano), John Levy (bass) and Denzil Best (drums).

The big band arrangements are hit-and-miss; for example, Buster Harding's arrangement of "Baby, Get Lost" is unnecessarily bombastic. Sy Oliver, too, is way over the top on "Taint Nobody's Business If I Do", faring far better with the bouncy "Them There Eyes", on which Holiday's vocal oozes with sensuality.

Two charming duets feature the vocals (but not the trumpet) of Louis Armstrong: "You Can't Lose a Broken Heart" is a lightly swingin' old-fashioned cautionary tale and "My Sweet Hunk o' Trash" gets sweeter with every listen, the two giants making each other crack up as they ad lib. If only there were alternate takes of these duets, let alone false starts and chatter!

All in all, this collection is a mixed bag of immortal masterpieces, hidden gems and a few interesting duds. Yet no matter the tune, Holiday's vocals are truly epic throughout this golden epoch. On the surface, the tone of her unusual instrument is at its most appealing here, like an exotic fruit perfectly ripened. Her relaxed phrasing sails freely and warmly as a midsummer breeze. While Holiday is a masterclass in subtlety most of the time, occasionally she'll make a bold choice out of left field; for instance, for the brilliant last note on "What Is This Thing Called Love?" she chooses the major third of the chord rather than the written tonic, in effect italicizing the question which is the song's title.

And then there is the interpretation of the lyrics, which is what made Lady Day the most influential vocalist of her time. Holiday's undeniably modern, conversational style of singing – which could not have happened without the invention of the microphone – can be heard in hundreds, if not thousands of diverse voices, from jazz contemporaries Carmen McRae and Abbey Lincoln to pop icons Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee. Indeed it is difficult to imagine what popular music would sound like without her contributions. Lady Day didn't need to shout, wail or scat; simply to feel and share. As Gabler stated in the liner notes of these historic Decca recordings, Holiday was "essentially a one-take singer", with a second take often recorded for safety. In most cases it is nearly impossible to decide which take is superior.

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CURTIS NOWOSAD

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CAILI O'DOHERTY TRIO

APRIL 16 (5 PM)
KEN FILIANO
LAFAYETTE HARRIS

APRIL 23 (5 PM)
TYLER BLANTON
EDUARDO BELO
VITOR GONÇALVES

APRIL 25 (6:30 PM)
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