

Top 20 Soul Jazz for 2004
as selected by Chuck Ingersol, host of *Soul Jazz Spectrum*

1) Melvin Sparks – **It Is What It Is** (Savant)

Melvin Sparks discovered that a CD full of non-stop grooves scores with soul jazz and jam band fans. Hopefully this will open up a whole new world – akin to Karl Denson’s Tiny Universe – for the storied guitarist. We always love a relentlessly funky disc, and this one is the year’s best.

2) Skip Heller – **Fakebook** (Hyena)

Amazing stuff from the guitarist from Seattle. Any CD that tackles and pulls off a range of material from old Grant Green/John Patton to Jackson 5 to Jerry Goldsmith’s hauntingly gorgeous theme from “Chinatown” deserves kudos. This disc is like visiting a new-to-you museum: every room holds something surprising, different and rewarding, and so do the tunes on this CD. One of the most pleasant and diverse listens of the year. Every track is arranged in a style either perfect or refreshingly perfect for the material.

3) Dr. Lonnie Smith – **Too Damn Hot** (Palmetto)

#1 on the jazz charts for a reason. Even the Doctor’s vocalizing has improved, as he demonstrates on the amusing “Yo’ Mama’s Got a Complex.” Aided by one of the heirs to Grant Green’s funk guitar throne, the marvelous Peter Bernstein. Another album of almost non-stop danceable grooves.

4) Mike Ledonne – **Burnin’ Out Loud** (Savant)

Better known as a pianist, Ledonne’s also joined by Peter Bernstein, along with Eric Alexander for a diverse Hammond B3 set.. In making the Carpenters’ “Close to You” swing, Ledonne elevates himself to Earland-like status.

5) Ron Levy – **After Midnight Grooves** (Levtron)

Last year’s #1 Soul Jazz CD artist, organist Levy scores again with a collection of burners mixed with smoother, slinkier material. Assisted by Karl Denson and Melvin Sparks, among others, Levy again demonstrates that a soul jazz release that’s well thought out and conceptualized can still feature fire and excitement.

6) Quincy Jones/Bill Cosby – **The Original Jam Sessions** (Concord)

Apparently Q had carte blanche to bring in big names and let them go to town. Although it only lasts under two minutes, Jimmy Smith’s “Jimmy Cookin’ On Top” is worth the price of admission, and Les McCann’s “Groovy Gravy” captures the great sound of his Limelight albums.

7) Paradigm Shift – **Changing Times** (Nagel-Heyer)

Local (Rochester) guys make good on their big Euro-label debut. Great guests like Wycliffe Gordon and Joe Locke, excellent mix of up tunes and ballads, and a killer rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Big Brother" that equals Larry Goldings' take.

8) Pucho and His Latin Soul Brothers – **The Hideout!** (Milestone)

You can never have too much Pucho. The usual fine mix of Latin, soul jazz, and the odd Martin Denny tune expected from Pucho. Plus a knockout version of "Superstition." It must be Stevie Wonder cover year.

9) Medeski, Martin and Wood – **End of the World Party [Just In Case]** (Blue Note)

MM&W return to some of their roots with a set ranging from the almost radical to the solidly in the pocket. Some great Fender Rhodes playing conjures up echoes of Ramsey Lewis in the 70s.

10) Tony Monaco – **Fiery Blues** (Summit)

The greatest soul jazz artist to come out of Columbus, Ohio since Rusty Bryant mixes blues vocals by Willie Pooch with his usual grooves and ballads. Excellent concept, beautifully executed.

REISSUE OF THE YEAR

Jack McDuff – **The Prestige Years** (Prestige)

What a monster McDuff was! These tracks, from 1960-65, cover blues, latin-inflected cuts, boogaloo and straight-ahead soul jazz. McDuff, who viewed himself as a demanding bandleader, featured intriguing arrangements that transcended the grooves, and even brought in innovative, unexpected touches, like the vibes of Lem Winchester. With sidemen including Kenny Burrell, George Benson, Red Holloway, Gene Ammons and others, there's not one track on the collection that isn't prime McDuff.

For more information about the Soul Jazz Spectrum, contact Chuck Ingersoll at chucketal@aol.com, or visit www.jazz901.org.