

Compilation of Ran Blake Reviews

(Recordings & Performances)

Updated: December 14, 2001

Chicago Tribune (December 11, 2001):

Also carried on the AP/Knight Ridder wire to other papers

Top 10 Jazz Recordings of 2001 (#8)

Sonic Temples (GM Recordings)

"...indispensable...Blake in effect takes [jazz standards] apart and puts them back together in exotic and alluring ways. The standard tunes, therefore, simply become vehicles for tracing the arcane and fantastically eccentric ways in which Blake thinks." — Howard Reich

Down Beat (January 2002):

Sonic Temples (GM Recordings)

"Ran Blake is so hip it hurts. At 66, he is still a pianist who can make you laugh at his wry humor one second and wring a tear the next. His playing and composing is so richly idiosyncratic and his interplay with the Schuller brothers' bassist Ed and drummer George so varied that Sonic Temples could have been recorded at any time in the last 45 years." — James Hale

Signal to Noise: The Journal of Improvised & Experimental Music (Winter 2002):

"This is the sound of lives fully connected and committed. Everything matters and nothing is taken for granted - what a fine way to make music."

AllAboutJazz.com (November 2001):

"Sonic Temples is a profusely elegant affair that shines forth with the reverence of a coveted museum piece. Strongly recommended."

LA Times (November 25, 2001):

"Original voices are so hard to come by in jazz pianism that a two-CD set such as this amounts to a signal event. To say that [Ran Blake] alters the harmonies of 'Black Coffee' or brings interesting colors to 'Stormy Weather' would be like contending that Michaelangelo did a nice touch-up job on the Sistine Chapel." — Howard Reich

JazzTimes (May 2001):

Horace Is Blue: A Silver Noir (hatOLOGY)

"It takes a real individualist to make such well-known material sound new, but Ran Blake certainly fills the bill on the excellent Horace Is Blue." — Duck Baker

Down Beat (March 2001):

Horace Is Blue: A Silver Noir (hatOLOGY)

"['Soulville' and 'The St. Vitus Dance'] are two of Horace Silver's better known tunes, and when Ran Blake retools them to fit his own singular sound, we get a dose of both disclosure and breakthrough. If you thought Blake's stuff was a bit to erudite in the past, here's a great place to get on board." — Jim Macnie

Boston Phoenix (January 13-20, 2000):

Duo En Noir w/ Enrico Rava (Between the Lines)

"This live concert of piano and trumpet improvisations triumphs by imaginatively expressing the spirit of film noir. There's a deep spiritual and musical empathy between these two artists, who seem thrilled at the chance to bring a sense of cinematic surprise to well-worn jazz chestnuts." — Norman Weinstein

JazzTimes (October 1999):

Something to Live For (hatOLOGY)

"Blake's harmonic sense is perhaps his most interesting asset. He consistently finds chords and sequences that are not quite what you expect." — Duck Baker

Tower Records' Pulse! (August 1999):

Something To Live For (hatOLOGY)

"There is no jazz pianist as dramatic as Blake, who has developed a startling and unsettling approach merging Monkisms with a cinema verite sensibility. Every tune possesses the visionary clarity of a surrealistic film."

Boston Globe (August 5, 1999):

Something To Live For (hatOLOGY)

"Few musicians can cover more musical ground using fewer notes than Blake, who again proves that rue virtuosity is a matter of playing only the notes that matter." — Bob McCullough

Northeast Performer (June 1999):

Something To Live For (hatOLOGY)

"There is a part of the imagination that won't be touched until the musings of Ran Blake find it. The same way one feels when Jimmy Stewart sees Kim Novak in a stark green dress for the first time, or when he climbs up a stool amid undergarment designs—if that moment could live alone on a piano." — Jonathan Babu

Cadence (June 1999):

Something To Live For (hatOLOGY)

"Ran Blake is a rare kind of musician, a keen-eyed visionary whose view takes in an immense range of seemingly disparate musics and whose mind combines them like mosaics to create a coherent and panoramic whole. It's not just the piano's gravity and Blake's sometimes ominous use of sustain; the music itself resonates long after the CD has stopped playing." — Stuart Broomer

JazzTimes (Jan/Feb 1998):

A Memory of Vienna (hatOLOGY)

"Time and again, Blake and Braxton pull at the edges of familiar compositions like "Round Midnight," "Yardbird Suite" and "Just Friends," creating the type of unexpected contours usually found in a lengthy collaborative process. Yet, what is most amazing about this album is that it languished in Uehlinger's vaults for so long." — Bill Shoemaker

Atlanta Journal Constitution (November 13, 1989)

Pianist Ran Blake Rolling Along On Strength of His Third Stream

"Schooled in the classics but imbued with the fire-tongued gospel of the black Pentecostal church he attended as a child, Mr. Blake has, in his own life, practiced the musical fusion that lies at the heart of Third Stream. Under his guidance, the term has expanded." — Bo Emerson

Cadence (July 1989):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 2 (GM Recordings)

"Ran Blake is a true original...[his] music is directly from his soul and does not require later corrections or 'sweetening.' Isn't that what jazz is supposed to be about?"—Scott Yanow

Boston Globe (March 23, 1989):

Painted Rhythms Vols. 1 & 2 (GM Recordings)

"There is no pianist alive, except possibly Cecil Taylor, who can elicit so many colors from the keyboard as Ran Blake, and Blake, it should be quickly noted, paints from a broader, more accessible palette." —Fred Kaplan

NPR's "Fresh Air with Terry Gross" (March 1989):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 2 (GM Recordings)

"To borrow Duke Ellington's favorite compliment, Ran Blake is beyond category." —Kevin Whitehead

Philadelphia Inquirer (December 15, 1988):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 2 (GM Recordings)

"...Blake's music has reached such a level of personal integration that everything he does is worthy of the highest rating. He's an original, and there have never been as many of these in American music as you've been led to think."

Down Beat (May 1988):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 1 (GM Recordings)/The Short Life of Barbara Monk (Soul Note)

"A Blake album is not merely a collection of performances, but a matrix of essences of implications; 'Painted Rhythms' and 'The Short Life of Barbara Monk' are no exceptions. Blake's deft touch and honed harmonic sensibility enable him to shift the narrative voice within a composition and plumb new depths of meaning." —Bill Shoemaker

CMJ New Music Report (February 26, 1988):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 1 (GM Recordings)

"Few pianists this side of Thelonious Monk have made more telling use of space than Ran Blake."

The Philadelphia Inquirer Weekend (January 8, 1988):

Painted Rhythms Vol. 1 (GM Recordings)

"On material ranging from Scott Joplin's 'Maple Leaf Rag' to Ray Charles' 'Hallelujah, I Love Her So,' he demonstrates an eloquence of touch and a sense of improvisational design surpassed only by Thelonious Monk."

Cadence (December 1987):

Painted Rhythms Volume I (GM Recordings):

"And what a marvelous sense of economy he has, best exemplified perhaps on the on the title track where a full sense of theme, exposition, orchestration and improvisation takes place in but 2 minutes and 19 seconds. He's an acquired taste and for me this is delicious." — Bob Rusch

Boston Globe (November 19, 1987):

Jordan Hall performance

"Whether accompanying or soloing, Blake's piano playing sent up unmistakable signs of intense passion as well as shimmering slivers of incandescent beauty."

High Fidelity (August 1986):

"Blake is a grand American eccentric in the dual tradition of Charles Ives and Thelonious Monk, content to travel his own path and let the world catch up when and if it chooses."
— Francis Davis

Seattle Post-Intelligencer (June 26, 1986):

Concert at Western Front, Vancouver, B.C. (du Maurier International Jazz Festival)

"Imagine a pianist with the artistic courage to present an imaginary, miniaturized film score of Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo." From "Credits" to "Nightmare and the Tower of San Juan Bautista," Blake's mini-masterpiece vibrated with the obsessive passion of that film, moving quickly, as so all of his pieces, from one dense, evocative scene to the next."

The Patriot Ledger (April 26, 1986):

Same as above, but six months later

"On the evidence of Thursday's late show at the Kenmore Square club, there is a mellow, fluent side of Blake's musicianship which clothes his unique freshness of approach to standard materials in a broadly melodic style appealing to both traditional and avant-garde ears all at once." — David Noble

Boston Herald (November 9, 1985):

Performances at the Starlight Roof

"Often brooding, [Ran Blake's music] is never pretentious. It is brilliant music, carefully worked out yet ever-surprising." — Daniel Gerwertz

Boston Globe (November 9, 1985):

Performances at the Starlight Roof

"Ran Blake's piano playing is brash, dramatic and uncompromising, full of deep, rumbling chords, ghostly overtones and rushing staccato passages that seem to evaporate almost as they're being played." — Michael Ullman

Boston Globe Magazine (May 5, 1985):

"Clearly, Blake knows harmonic theory and all the other elements of conservatory study, inside and out. His sounds, though, don't follow established patterns; they seem to come out of nowhere, to flow directly from his visions." — Fred Kaplan

Jazziz (Jan/Feb 1985):

Suffield Gothic (Soul Note)

"The iconoclastic Third Stream pianist, Blake, proves he's gotta lotta soul when he joins forces with tenorman Houston Person—who proves he's gotta lotta technique."

Boston Phoenix (January 1, 1985):

Top 10 Jazz Albums 1984

"Ran Blake caught a bit of the hard bop spirit on Suffield Gothic (Soul Note), the most visceral and blues-drenched recital of his career, as well as the worthiest showcase to date for tenor saxophonist Houston Person, who turns this mostly solo album into a duo recital on three tracks." — Bob Blumenthal

Boston Globe (November 17, 1984):

Variations on "Vertigo"/The Cinematic Ear (solo performance at the Brattle Theater)

"Blake's imaginative use of surprise, stabbing staccatos—particularly on the same upper-register notes—shifting dynamics, dissonant harmonies and occasionally menacing tremolos filled his musical canvas with mostly somber grays and placid blues. The audience was so rapt that nary a candy-wrapper rattle intruded at the Brattle."

Washington Post (August 17, 1984):

Suffield Gothic (Soul Note)

"Ran Blake was putting out albums of highly personal solo piano music when Keith Jarrett and George Winston could barely touch the pedals with their toes. If Blake were a painter, he might take a masterpiece and paint it white before judiciously and abstractly suggesting its original form through entirely new coloration." — Richard Harrington

Washington Post (August 14, 1984):

"'Third Stream': Flowing Strong"

Pianists Louis Gottschalk, Scott Joplin, Duke Ellington, John Lewis and Ran Blake have each contributed, unwittingly or by design, to a century-old idiom that was not given a name until the 1950's when it became a self-conscious effort dubbed 'third stream' by Gunther Schuller, its chief proponent." — W. Royal Stokes

International Herald Tribune (June 13, 1984):

"Introverted, concise, sometimes chilling, always well constructed, his music can, perhaps too generally, be classified with Keith Jarrett's and George Winston's, both of whom are criticized with 'not playing jazz,' though Blake preceded them and never approached their fame and fortune." — Mike Zwerin

Chicago Tribune (October 30, 1983):

Jazz Showcase at the Blackstone Hotel

"Describing Blake's music is no easy task, because there are few precedents in jazz, or anywhere else, for what he tries to do when he sits down at the keyboard. For one thing, it is almost totally improvised and can refer quite naturally to black gospel music and to a host of other 'native American' sounds—movie soundtracks, old pop tunes, and the compositions of such jazz masters as Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and George Russell—not to mention the non-American music of Greek composer Mikas Theodorakis and the tangos of Argentina." — Larry Kart

New York Times (June 28, 1983):

Abraham Goodman House

"His harmony shares Bill Evans' love of dense, lustrous extended chords, and his melodic lines usually revert in the end to the delicate ornamental filigree of blues pianism. He is certainly a beautifully grounded musician, and his scrupulous avoidance of brilliance for its own sake showed him to be a modest and sincere one as well." — Bernard Holland

Down Beat (September 1982):

Duke Dreams (Soul Note):

"...this is a haunting and rather remarkable set of performances by a genuine American original. He can thrill you with the passion of pure reason; he can give ideas substance, make them seem real and moving. *****." — Francis Davis

Stereo Review (November 1981):

Film Noir (Arista/Novus)

"Although six of the compositions are not his own, it is not at all inappropriate to refer to everything on this album as Blake's music, for every measure bears his distinct stamp. Ran Blake is a very talented music maker—I have said that before, and I repeat it with emphasis after hearing this album."

Contemporary Keyboard (August 1980):

Film Noir (Arista/Novus)

"Here Blake's ice-cold cluster chords and jagged phrasing come to the fore. Elsewhere they serve as splashes of color in more normal ensemble work—sometimes swinging but still darkly colored and at times nearly atonal. Recommended without hesitation." — Jim Aiken

Boston Phoenix (June 17, 1980):

A Movie Fan's Notes

"'Film Noir' is also a testament to Blake's achievements as NEC's Third Stream chairman. Today Blake uses Third Stream to connote the blending of any two disparate musics, a universalist approach he stresses by making his students learn pieces by ear instead of through printed scores." — Bob Blumenthal

Down Beat (February 1980):

Ran Blake's Third Stream

"To say that Ran Blake is not your typical jazz pianist would be as colossal an understatement as saying that Lenny Bruce was not your typical comedian. Blake's esthetic is an outgrowth of an incredibly cosmopolitan blend of sources old, new, borrowed and blue. He's as comfortable with Debussy as with Mahalia Jackson, with Bud Powell as Ravi Shankar, with Stevie Wonder as Mikis Theodorakis—and his diverse and prodigious repertory reflects his wide-ranging and unclassifiable musical tastes." — Art Lange

Down Beat (September 6, 1979):

Rapport (Arista/Novus)

"His grab bag of tricks—jarring seconds, tangled, angry snatches of melody that pounce then etherize, burning bass forays—this whole arsenal can easily be mistaken for Blake's 'meaning,' since it's easy enough to hang critical handles on them and in doing so to make Blake into a kind of supercharged Monk/Bley amalgam, neatly avoiding what Blake, the burglar/artificer, is all about. Meaning here eludes chord by chord, lick by lick analysis and is to be found instead in the constant commingling of the two musical traditions. *****."

New York Times (July 17, 1979):

Black Beans Studio performance

"Unlike post-Monk pianists who have chosen to concentrate on the rhythmic sphere, Mr. Blake is concerned with the total picture. He recomposes the harmonic structure of whatever material he is tackling, and his understanding of harmony includes a wonderfully detailed attention to harmonics." — Robert Palmer

Penguin Guide to Jazz:

Epistrophy (Soul Note)

"Blake is a scholar, and something of a gentleman, with an approach to music very far removed from the seat-of-the-pants gigging mentality of most jazz musicians. His solo performances—and he has generally preferred to work without sidemen—are thoughtful, precisely articulated, but always intriguingly varied, combining jazz standards, original compositions of great interest, ethnic musics from all over the world."

Improvisations (Soul Note)

"Piano duos can be messily unsatisfactory affairs; one thinks of the Cecil Taylor/Mary Lou Williams imbroglio in particular. This, though, is exceptional."

Painted Rhythms Vols. 1 & 2 (GM Recordings)

"Like trumpeter Franz Kogelman, Blake takes a highly personal stance on the jazz tradition, reinterpreting classic material with a curious mixture of respectful precision and free-floating innovation."

Short Life of Barbara Monk (Soul Note)

"This is a truly marvelous album...[the title track is a] complex and moving composition that shifts effortlessly between a bright lyricism and an edgy premonition; Blake plays quite beautifully, and his interplay with the young but supremely confident rhythm section is a revelation."

You Stepped Out of A Cloud (Owl)

"Lee's voice has a sweet indistinctness that really does suggest she has only recently descended with Blake from some great stack of cumulo-nimbus far above what we'd normally call jazz."

That Certain Feeling (hat Art)

"The music is full of oblique, inverted and sometimes probably imaginary references to Gershwin's corpus. It's a record to be swallowed whole, then nibbled and digested over time."

All Music Guide to Jazz (3rd Edition):

Blue Potato & Other Outrages (Milestone)

"A very emotional improviser (whose unexpected explosions of sound sometimes punctuate otherwise introspective performances), Blake is a true original. On this solo piano date, Blake makes political (if nonverbal) statements on many of these pieces, improvising off the titles rather than the chord changes."—Scott Yanow

Breakthru (IAI)

"The unique pianist is heard on this album performing brief versions of a colorful variety of standards and originals. Intriguing music."—Scott Yanow

Rapport (Arista/Novus)

"In general, this music is fairly sparse and very much in the pianist's unique style, a strong addition to his discography."—Scott Yanow

Film Noir (Arista/Novus)

"Ran Blake's dark piano style and dramatic improvisations make for a perfect match with the mood of film noir. Utterly fascinating interpretations that add up to a memorable gem. *****."—Scott Yanow

Duke Dreams (Soul Note)

While hinting at Duke's piano style, Ran Blake often reharmonizes and greatly reinvents his music, including such pieces as 'Drop Me Off In Harlem,' 'It Don't Mean A Thing' and 'Take The A Train.' Highly recommended. *****."—Scott Yanow

Improvisations (Soul Note)

"This very interesting release matches together Ran Blake and Jaki Byard in a set of piano duets. In other words, this matchup works."—Scott Yanow

Vertigo (Owl)

Ran Blake's follow-up to his 'Film Noir' album of 1980 is just as extraordinary. This set makes for fascinating listening and is particularly recommended to movie fans. *****."—Scott Yanow

Painted Rhythms Vol. 1 (GM Recordings)

"Highly recommended, as are most of Ran Blake's unique recordings."—Scott Yanow

A Memory of Vienna (hatOLOGY)

"Blake, who has always been an expert at contrasting sound with silence in dramatic fashion, keeps an implied beat going during the songs, but throws in plenty of surprising curves, consistently stimulating Braxton. They swing whenever they feel it best serves the music; however, they do not let the tradition restrain their improvising and creativity."—Scott Yanow

That Certain Feeling (Hat Art)

"Blake has been among jazz's least acclaimed players for years, and that probably won't change, but this should refute the notion that his work is too obsessed with cerebral concerns rather than emotions."—Scott Yanow

Round About (Music & Arts)

"Thought-provoking music."—Scott Yanow

Unmarked Van: Tribute to Sarah Vaughn (Soul Note)

"This moody and melancholy yet strangely celebratory set will stay in one's memory long after the CD has been played."—Scott Yanow

Sonic Temples (GM Recordings)

"4 1/2 stars. Ran Blake has never been so powerful or so quiet, the restraint and space here is almost mystical. This is in many ways just the next chapter in an already wildly fruitful and profound career...it is also a reinvention of the artist in a portrait of himself."