

Jazz and more in DSD

It could be what DSD was invented for: with its dynamic range and fine detail allied to smoothness and musicality, it no surprise that so many recordings of jazz, blues and more are available in single bit audio. Here's a look at some favourite recordings, old and new

There were two good reasons for the introduction of DSD all those years back: the hard-nosed business one was that the licence agreements for the CD format, by then ubiquitous, were coming up to expiry, and the inventors of the system were looking for some way of retaining the position in which manufacturers of both hardware and discs had to keep on stumping up to use it.

That was the real backstory of the unedifying format war between SACD and DVD-Audio, which sprung up when the DVD forum, led by Toshiba, refused to pay royalties to the Sony/Philips SACD axis, and in the ensuing conflict the record labels took sides, so which format you bought – not that many did buy – was more or less determined by the artists you wanted to hear. And when all this happened, as the 20th century became the 21st, the Betamax/VHS format war was fresh in many minds.

It was a battle set to end without any clear winner, in that DVD-A vanished, but SACD failed to become the replacement for the familiar CD. Why? Well, there's more to it than just format confusion: hot on the heels of the SACD launch in 1999 and DVD-A a year later came a little think called the iPod, creating a revolution in the way the mass-market consumed audio. Basically the word said, 'Who needs better sound quality? What we've got is good enough, and this little iPod lets me carry my entire music library in my pocket.'

Philips and Sony fought back, this time battling each other with their MiniDisc and

Digital Compact Cassette, but messy though that particular skirmish was, it was little more than a small local insurrection compared with the way iThings were steamrolling their way through the music industry, and was soon forgotten.

Yes, SACD lives on, in that a small number of (mainly audiophile-oriented) labels still release music in the format, but when the owner of a successful – well, in SACD terms – label says with a sigh 'I've got about 60,000 discs in storage here – what can I do with those?' you realise that things aren't looking good.

Fortunately the file format behind SACD – Direct Stream Digital, or DSD – lives on in the downloadable music arena, which brings us to the other reason behind the introduction of both the discs and their enabling technology: with its single-bit, high sampling rate process, it's about as close to the original analogue sound as a recording technology can get. In simple terms, rather than hacking the waveform up into chunks of samples, it can store every sample individually. That's why right from the start those in the know were pointing out that digital-to-analogue conversion for DSD could be very simple: as the late Ken Ishiwata, a long-time advocate of SACD, put it when launching the Marantz SA-10 player/DAC, in which everything is upconverted to 11.2MHz/1bit, requiring only a low-pass filter to remove the carrier before analogue output, 'DSD is analogue.'

It's hardly surprising, then, that DSD continues to find favour with some of those recording and listening to classical and jazz music, and the like. And with the greater availability of hardware able to play, and even stream, DSD files, the format is enjoying a popularity that may have eluded it back in the days of the disc wars.

What's more, while it's proving a good format for remastering and rediscovering old analogue recordings, at least now the dodgy old practice of remastering CD-quality digital masters to SACD seems to have fallen by the wayside, there are also new recordings being made, either directly in DSD or in the 352.8kHz/24bit DXD (Digital eXtreme Definition) format originally developed for the Merging Pyramix workstation as a means of editing DSD recordings, and now used as a recording format in its own right.

One of the leading distributors of the DSD format is the Netherlands-based NativeDSD

website – nativesd.com – which, as the name suggests, deals only in recordings either originally made in DSD/DXD, or those sourced from analogue originals. As such it provides a good hunting ground for those looking for 'true DSD' recordings, and not just in SACD-quality DSD64 (i.e. 2.8MHz/1bit) stereo: the company also offers a wide selection of recordings in both stereo and multichannel, and in a range of DSD formats all the way up to 'octuple-DSD', or DSD512 (22.5MHz/1bit). And yes, there are DACs out there able to handle DSD512!

So, what can you play? Here are some suggestions, covering jazz, blues and the like.



THE L.A. NETWORK Ella On Our Mind

2xHD/Resonance Recordings 2XHDRE1168,
DSD64-DSD512

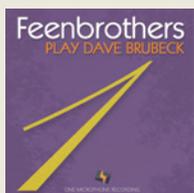
As if to prove the 'DSD is analogue' maxim, this is an all-analogue recording, released in a range of DSD stereo formats, and the latest release from 2xHD, which is perhaps best-known for its remastering and release in DSD (as well as on vinyl and analogue tape) of classic jazz recordings over the past five years. The project, led by 2xHD's André Perry and Resonance Records' George Klabin, branched out late last year with new trio recordings of the Brubeck catalogue (*Dave Brubeck Redux*, 2XHDRE1162), and now follows up with a set paying tribute to Ella Fitzgerald.

Like the Brubeck set, this one was recorded 'off the floor', live and with no overdubs, onto 15ips analogue tape in stereo, using a Nagra-T recorder modified with valve electronics and a custom-built carbon-fibre damped head-block, wired directly with silver cable to a valve preamp. Transfer to DXD is via 2XHD's custom ADC,

with the whole mastering system powered by a super capacitor supply.

All impressive stuff, and the performances more than live up to all the technology, with vocals by Aubrey Logan, who also plays trombone, and Bill Cantos, also on keyboards. Additional pianism is by Josh Nelson, who also played on the Brubeck set, while the engine room is Chris Colangelo on bass and Jamey Tate on sticks'n'skins,

It works, and spectacularly well, whether on the plaintive *Lush Life* or the swing of *Too Darn Hot*, with Logan channelling the younger Ella in an almost uncanny fashion, or the sultry reading of *Hernando's Hideaway*. Best of all, the recording has a wonderful immediacy and lack of artifice about it, and some fabulous musicianship.



FEENBROTHERS
Play Dave Brubeck
Sound Liaison SL-109,
DSD64-DSD512

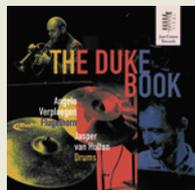
Another take on Brubeck, this time by the brothers van der Feen – and yes, they really are siblings. Starting out as a family band in the Netherlands, they have worked individually with artists from Caro Emerald to the Royal Concertgebouw, and now here they are back together as a band: Mark on piano, Paul on sax, Clemens on bass and Matthijs on drums in front of a small audience in Studio 2 of the Muziekcentrum van de Omroep. And a very knowledgeable audience it is, too, being able to clap along to *Unsquare Dance* in 7/4 time! Rather more people turned up than expected, increasing the intimacy – or at least the closeness – of the audience, and creating a presence that will be familiar to those of us who haunt smaller jazz venues: as recording engineer Frans de Rond noted as appreciation was shown at the end of the set, 'Look at the phase meter, it's practically straight in the middle – phase coherent applause!'

Recorded on a single Josephson C700S microphone, this set has a fabulous live feel to it, aided and abetted by the sense of improvisation and the odd mishap – a mobile phone falling into the piano at one point – along with the sense of the performers not only bouncing off each other but also interacting with the audience. This is probably as close to 'being there' as you're going to hear – and the performances are great, too.

ANGELO VERPLOEGEN, JASPER VAN HULTEN

The Duke Book

Just Listen Records JL019, DXD/DSD64-DSD512



Subtitled *The Music of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn*, this is one of those sets that sounds like a real oddity, but works surprisingly well.

There are just the two musicians here, and the instrumentation is unusual – flugelhorn player Verploegen and drummer van Hulsten – but the result is a recording as intriguing as it is spare and clean.

It's recorded and released on the Just Label, which is one of producer Jared Sacks's side-projects – when he's not running Channel Classics and NativeDSD, that is – and the label's approach is a very simple one. Literally so: the microphones – from B&K, Schoeps and AKG – are set up in a real venue, not a studio (in this case the MCO in Hilversum once more), and the recording is made directly, with no EQ, no compression, no mixing after the event and no editing.

This is one-take recording, and the result is real music, not a collage of snippets assembled on a digital workstation: Sacks balances up the microphones, and away they go. All of which shows in the lively, spontaneous performances captured here, from the familiar – *Satin Doll*, *Caravan*, *Take the A Train* – to the lesser-known tracks and the improvised interludes. You can hear the two master musicians feeding off each other, their appreciation of the music, and the total confidence with which they soar off in new directions. And for just two, it's amazing how big and multi-textured a sound they can create, especially when van Hulsten really gets the kit motoring.



HANS THEESINK
Live at Jazzland

Sommelier du Son
sds0016, DSD64-DSD512

As the name of the label suggests, this is a recording for which all the audiophile ducks were set in a row, from microphone choice to cleaning up the power supply for the recording gear using a PS Power Plant. Five separate microphones were used from three different brands – one just for Theesink's foot-tapping! – and it was mixed on location

at the Jazzland club in Vienna, and recorded to Studer A810 analogue tape machines, with monitoring using a dedicated headphone amp to drive Beyerdynamics, and a Bryston amp powering Amphion speakers. Oh and the whole thing was produced in association with Fink Audio Consulting – a name which will need no introduction here.

Audiophile enough for you? Good – now forget all that stuff and just listen to the man play, for play he certainly can on this bluesy set of mainly self-penned tracks, most of which bear their inspirations prominently on their sleeve. And when Theesink does cover a classic, as he does with his acoustic take on Chuck Berry's *Maybelline*, you'll find it hard not to smile.

This is a real foot-tapper of a set, but it will leave you in awe of the performer's technique and sheer talent – or at least it will the second time you listen. The first you're likely to be enjoying it too much.



DAVID ELIAS
The Window

Sketti Sandwich
Productions
SSP3162D64, DSD64-
DSD512

Not by any means a new release – it was actually recorded in 2002, and first released the following year – this album is striking on several levels. For a start, Elias's work has long been an audiophile favourite, but before you dismiss it for that, let's make it clear that the songwriter/guitarist not only produces great music, but also great-sounding recordings, going his own way with self-released albums that still set standards almost two decades on.

Not only that, he was also a DSD pioneer, recording *The Window* direct to the format, and in multichannel too, using an early version of the Sonoma DSD Workstation to capture the live acoustic sessions in eight channels. It's another one of those recordings all about a realistic live sound of the musicians playing together, and can still induce a shiver with the absolute 'you are there' ambience, whether in stereo or 5.1 channels, and above all Elias writes ridiculously catchy songs and performs them with superb musicians. Listen to this one and the chances are you'll be scouring NativeDSD to pick up his other recordings.