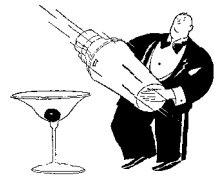


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JAZZ - LATIN - VINTAGE SOUNDS - VOCALS - LOUNGE - WORLD & COCKTAILS

Dreamy CHARLES BROWN



plus

Frank Sinatra
Viento de Agua
Tito Rodríguez

We'd been planning this retrospective on Charles Brown for a few months. Just as we set fingers to keyboard, we heard the news that Charles Brown was not in good health and the situation was serious. Unfortunately, we passed a newsstand and saw the headline that he hadn't made it. This was very disturbing news. For selfish reasons, life without Charles Brown around is inconceivable. As a resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, he was generous with his public appearances and always was a lively guest on the local radio. Things will not be the same.

Not so long ago, we flew home from Amsterdam with some Dutch friends, took our showers and then drove to San Francisco's Café du Nord for the supper show. Café Du Nord is an atmospheric place, reminiscent of a 1920s speakeasy without being too cute or precious. As we've mentioned before in these very pages, the food at Du Nord is surprisingly good and they had a nice beer selection that made our Dutch friends comfortable. The opening act was a nice modern jazz trio but the real reason we were there was the headliner, Charles Brown. Well-fed and pleasantly under the influence, we easily could have succumbed to jetlag, but with Charles Brown on stage, it seemed impossible. Despite his advancing years, he played the piano like a demon and sang like an angel. His distinct "cocktail blues" voice never fails to send us, and for this reason, it's hard to speak of Charles Brown without putting "the dreamy" before his name. Our Dutch friends were impressed with the evening in particular and the U.S.A. in general, but we didn't have the heart to tell them this was a singular event.

In his day, Charles Brown was the rage. He influenced artists like Nat "King" Cole and Ray Charles and sold a huge number of records, first with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers and later as a solo act. Like many great artists, he fell into relative obscurity as tastes changed, but his signature song, *Driftin' Blues*, always brings recognition to R&B fans. In the 1980s, he recorded an album called *One More for the Road* on the mighty Blues label Alligator and from there his star was on the rise, with rock singer Bonnie Raitt being his most visible advocate.

He's always been referred to as a Blues singer but that's really fair to Charles Brown or to other "Blues"-ers. Many of his songs follow the standard Blues form, but there's an undeniable sweetness to his voice, even when singing the darkest lyrics. We have no idea as to Brown's drinking habits, but he always sounds slightly drunk. This must be his manner rather than his habit because his piano-playing is always sure and steady. In many ways, Charles Brown is like Dinah Washington in that they both approached a song in their own particular way. We can pick up a Washington disc and look at the song tracks and know exactly how she's going to phrase each title. In general, we really like Dinah but we don't have the urge to be completists like we do with other artists. If Charles Brown sang standards, we don't know if we'd have the desire to collect everything he did. Luckily, Brown sings a happy mixture of originals, obscurities and standards. Even on his most uneven albums, there are always at least a few gems. We must quickly add that there are very few mediocre Charles Brown albums so buying most anything by him would be safe.

His early years are captured on *Driftin' Blues: The Best of Charles Brown* (EMI CDP-7-97989-2). We should warn you right now that it seems like almost every album he did contained a version of *Driftin' Blues*. These tracks are from his Alladin years. The sound quality goes from fair to dismal, but it's easy to overlook. More completist collectors will want to spring for the Mosaic box, *The Complete Alladin Recordings of Charles Brown*. We did and we're happy about it.

Available from his "dark years" are *Blues N'Brown* on Jewel Records (Jewel JCD 5006), *Boss of the Blues* (Mainstream JK 53624) and *Driftin' Blues* (DCC DJZ-603). These aren't our favorite recordings. *Boss of the Blues* is nice, but *Blues N'Brown* is only fair and on *Driftin' Blues*, Brown plays the organ instead of the piano. There are doubtless other recordings that will surface that are better, but it's not until his seminal *One More for the Road* that Brown really becomes exciting again.

1986's *One More for the Road* (Alligator ALCD 4771) is just short of a perfect album, pleasing both Blues fans and the Cocktail set. It's one of those albums that you play over and over and still come back for more.

Blues and Other Love Songs is a small, beautiful recording for the now defunct Muse label (Muse MCD 5466). It's bound to be re-issued soon or perhaps available second-hand. The tempos are generally slow and the instrumentals are jazzier than usual.

His Bullseye Blues recordings celebrate his newfound success and treat him to four-star production values. While from a Classic Popular music point of view this is fine, we're sure his more hardcore blues fans found the product a little too slick. All three albums, *Someone to Love* (CD BB 9514), *All My Life* (CD BB 9501) and *Just a Lucky So & So* (CD BB 9521), have great moments. For us, *Just a Lucky So & So* stands out as the best but all three are recommended.

His run on Verve Records included *Honey Dripper* (314 529 848-2), *So Goes Love* (314 539 967 2) and *These Blues* (314 523 022 2). All are nice but somewhat lackluster, almost in response to the big productions of the Bullseye recordings.

If you're intrigued, we suggest *One More for the Road* and the EMI *Driftin' Blues* as a start and go from there. Then see if you don't start putting "dreamy" in front of his name as we do.

Frank Sinatra

The Complete Reprise Studio Recordings

REPRISE 47045-2

Until recently, when asked about Sinatra, our response was immediately "the Capitol years." We often speak in absolutes and live to regret it. Sure, we have the Tommy Dorsey box (RCA/BMG's *The Song Is You*) and like it a lot, a few Columbia discs, and a few live recordings. For our aesthetic and taste, the Capitol years are just what grease our griddle.

From the Reprise years, we've always loved the Jobim disc and *September of My Years*, but we've never been inspired to dig much deeper. We've never been nuts about *That's Life*, *My Way* or even *Strangers in the Night*. Don't even get us started about *New York, New York*. You can see why we've never pursued these recordings.

The other problem is that during these years, we were actively participating in the mass-produced

counter-culture. Frank represented everything we were against and we could cut him no slack. His attempts to keep with the new beat of a vibrant generation made him look even sillier.

Looking back, we just have to say Frank was always great, even when he sang garbage. Especially on the first 10 of this 20-disc set, Frank was in great voice and mostly sang great music with great arrangements. The second half of the set is more problematic but it's actually fun to see how a classic pop singer tries to adapt to the times. Sometimes it actually works.

We've enjoyed a recent immersion into Sinatra. We played every disc in succession and made mental notes about our favorite tracks. The box, while handsome in its simplicity, contains a virtually useless book that offers no insight on the individual recordings, not even revealing which tracks were on what albums. We used Will Friedwald's musical biography of Frank, *The Song Is You* (DeCapo Press) as our guide and had a fine vacation. The book is great in that it feels as if you're having a conversation with a friend you wished you had that could discuss the details and effects of Sinatra's voice, even when you don't agree.

Is *The Complete Reprise Studio Recordings* for everybody? No, but we bet Sinatra fans, armed with the Friedwald book, will have a great time.



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Viento de Agua

De Puerto Rico al Mundo

AGOGO (QBADISC) AG 9503 LATIN/ PUERTO RICO

When speaking of Puerto Rico's contributions to Latin American music, it's usually to describe their particularly intense style of Salsa or their influence on Latin music in New York. In addition to the Salsa beat, Puerto Ricans also have produced the Bomba and Plena to varying degrees of success. The Bomba is supposedly more African in influence while the Plena is more Spanish. To be honest, we've never had much luck distinguishing the two, but have always been keenly aware of a different Puerto Rican sound that almost seems to mix Brazil's Samba with the more Caribbean styles.

Both the Bomba and Plena started as a more folkloric music and both continued to evolve. Versatile Salsa musicians would often throw in a Bomba or Plena into the mix. Puerto Ricans Ismael Rivera (What a voice!) and Rafael Cortijo (What a beat!) never strayed far from their native roots. Recently there's been more interest in these particular forms, most notably by the rootsy band Los Pleneros de la 21.

Viento de Agua's *De Puerto Rico al Mundo* takes the Plena and Bomba and sets them on fire. Much like the renewed energy in a lot of Cuban music, Viento de Agua modernizes the sound without compromising the original. And like Salsa, the intensity and manic fun starts strong and just keeps getting stronger, particularly on tracks like *De Puerto Rico a Nueva York*. Even when things seem to start out sweet and carefree, the crescendo builds, often to the point of happy hysteria. We just love this sound.

One dud on the album is *Rockeros Muertos* which is listed as a "Plena / Rock." Silly guitar riffs and a Styx sense of drama aren't our bag, and we doubt they'll be yours, but it's just one track on an otherwise excellent recording.



Tito Rodriguez

Estoy Como Nunca

POLYDOR 314521547-2

Much has been written about the Mambo wars of the 1950s and the rivalry between Tito Puente, Machito and Tito Rodriguez. It would be hard to say of there really was a winner (although Tito Puente's longevity helps his case.) Of the Big Three, we have to admit we've always found Tito Rodriguez the least interesting. He's had many wonderful hits and quite a few good arrangements but his voice wasn't particularly striking and he insisted on singing bolero after bolero, which drags down the action and there are many mediocre boleros. Having said all of this, we're happy to report that *Estoy Como Nunca* is about the most welcome re-issue we could hope for.

The sound quality is excellent and it's a treat to hear the big brassy horn section go to town. The numbers are very "arranged" and the notes credit Ray Santos (See Mario Bauza's recent CDs and Linda Ronstadt's *Frenesi*) and Rene Hernandez. The feel is definitely mambo, which is interesting since the recording date is from 1968. Soul, Boogaloo or the seeds of Salsa would have seemed more likely. Still, there's no sense that this is a nostalgic tribute to the past. This is the real thing.

There are a few boleros, but don't be discouraged. The title track, followed by more equally danceable material, is such a great flag-waver that it alone is worth the cost of the CD.



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