

Metropolitan Opera House Jam Session 1944

Written by bluesever

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Musicians:

Billie Holiday, Red Norvo, Lionel Hampton, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Barney Bigard, Jack Teagarden, Cleman Hawkins, Sid Catlett, Oscar Pettiford, Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge,

Al Casey,
+ Benny Goodman, Jess Stacey, Sid Weiss, Morey Field

Recorded: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, January 18, 1944

The time was January 1944, and the first bebop band (led by Dizzy Gillespie) had just been hired on 52nd Street. Meanwhile the masters of the old school were assembled at the Metropolitan Opera House, blissfully ignorant of the cataclysmic changes that would transform the jazz world over the next several years.

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But let's forget the coming revolution for a moment, and instead enjoy the world that was about to end. The greatest soloists of early 20th-century jazz are assembled on a single stage, and engage in some gentlemanly one-upmanship on the most familiar jam session chord changes of the day, courtesy of George Gershwin. Everybody has a chance to shine, but I especially like Eldridge (who seems inspired by his chance to go toe-to-toe with Louis Armstrong), the drumming of Sid Catlett, who energizes the whole proceedings, and the lead-off soloist on the track, the underappreciated Red Norvo.

I am reminded here of the claims of ardent medievalists, who will tell you that the waning of the Middle Ages was a time in which many great things came to fruition, and that the Renaissance spoiled much of the beauty of what went before. You could make a similar case for this final flowering of Swing Era majesty, put on display at this historic concert. Soon these same players would be considered old-fashioned, but you would never guess it by listening to this performance, which represents a type of perfection that bop and free and all the other later styles can never dispel. They got rhythm. ---Ted Gidia

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