

The bull market for vocal jazz ran on in 2004

YEAR IN REVIEW | Singers were everywhere with Diana Krall, Norah Jones, and Cassandra Wilson leading the pack

BY GREG BUIUM

Consensus isn't something jazz communities find easily, if at all. Friction, a bit of push and pull, these are the things that have helped give birth to some of the music's finest moments over the years.

So, too, in 2004.

That's not to say this was a watershed year by any means. But when the bickering bubbles to the surface you know everything's humming along just fine.

Just start with singers, a trend once again in 2004 — really a bull market for vocal jazz that doesn't seem to be breaking anytime soon.

Despite a near perpetual howl from purists, singers are everywhere — leading with Diana Krall and Norah Jones, of course, and followed by Cassandra Wilson, Jane Monheit and a whole host of men, too.

Recently, however, people are starting to see how far most of this music is pulling away from anything resem-

bling jazz per se.

Krall's migration to the very soft centre quickened as she covered Joni Mitchell and wrote originals with husband Elvis Costello on her new disc, *The Girl in the Other Room*. Jones, too, made it clear that she's always been a child of Carole King rather than Sarah Vaughan, despite being on Blue Note, one of the music's legendary labels.

Still, their cumulative effect keeps turning the jazz economy upside down.

The Girl in the Other Room

sold nearly 150,000 units in its first week, entering the *Billboard* charts at No. 4, while Jones's *Feels Like Home* has already sold more than four million copies in North America alone.

In a genre that accounts for just three per cent of all CD sales, it's easy to see why every label wants the next "It" girl (or boy). At best, their more successful instrumental artists might sell 10,000 discs.

Odd, then, that jazz listeners can muddle their way through the distinctions between celebrity and greatness as much as anyone.

Take the continuing brouhaha over Bad Plus, an American piano trio signed to Columbia records.

Here you have blue-chip jazzers acting as pop culture weathermen. Plucking bits and pieces from their own musical lives, they've created a kind of postmodern drama, jumping from Ornette Coleman to Black Sabbath to the Pixies.

"Is the Bad Plus bad ass or just plain bad?" asked Chicago's *Down Beat* magazine in a piece earlier this year.

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American piano trio Bad Plus's music jumps from Ornette Coleman to Black Sabbath to The Pixies.