

## Johnny Griffith Quintet *The Lion, Camel & Child*

GBRECORDS 108109

★★★★★

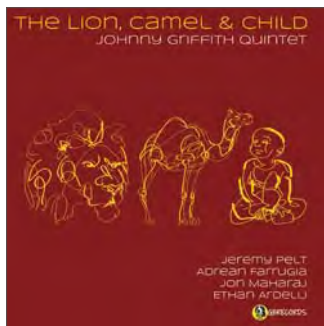
Honestly, the notion of “Nietzschean jazz” doesn’t sound like much fun. “Solos which do not kill us make us stronger,” and all that, right? Well, don’t get the wrong idea: The suite at the center of *The Lion, Camel & Child* is based on Nietzsche’s concept of the three metamorphoses from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. There, the philosopher offers the characters as metaphors for the spiritual stages of wisdom, perseverance and innocence, qualities Toronto saxophonist Johnny Griffith tries to capture. Representing a philosophical concept through music is a tough trick, but between Griffith’s command of motivic development and his quintet’s ability to spin ideas into emotionally simpatico solos, it’s not hard to “hear” the ideas at play. Pianist Adrean Farrugia is particularly adept, shading the harmony, so the circular themes remain in play, even as soloists move beyond them and trumpeter Jeremy Pelt embraces Griffith’s melodic syntax. Despite the lack of underlying narrative, the rest of the album handily maintains the joyful and cohesive performances, informed by a conversational interplay that suggests a great live band. Could it be that solos which kill us listeners only make the players stronger?

—J.D. Cosidine

**The Lion, Camel & Child:** The Lion; The Camel; Cadenza; The Child; Narcomedusae; Strawberry Qwik; Amarone; For A Derailed Painter; Deliciously Ambiguous; The Corridor; Last Say. (60:52)

**Personnel:** Johnny Griffith, tenor saxophone; Jeremy Pelt, trumpet; Adrean Farrugia, piano; Jon Maharaj, bass; Ethan Adrelli, drums.

**Ordering info:** [grecords.ca](http://grecords.ca)



## May Okita *Art Of Life*

ORIGIN 82771

★★★½

Tokyo-born May Okita spent several years living in Los Angeles, where she studied clinical psychiatry at UCLA and sang in area jazz clubs. Shortly before she returned to Tokyo, Okita recorded *Art Of Life* in a trio with pianist Josh Nelson and guitarist Larry Koonse.

She has a pleasant voice, obviously loves the material here and takes most of the melodies pretty straightahead, other than scating a bit during the closing vamp of “Let’s Face The Music And Dance” and singing wordlessly on Duke Ellington’s “Blue Rose.” And while “Blue Rose” and Randy Newman’s “When She Loved Me” aren’t covered often, and “Art Of Life” was co-written by Okita and Nelson, all of the other songs have been recorded countless times. These renditions, despite the sincere treatments, don’t stand out from the crowd; Okita doesn’t take any real chances in her singing. Nelson and Koonse modernize many of the songs, though, and highlights include the pianist’s accompaniment on “Both Sides Now,” a transformation of “Detour Ahead” into a waltz and a swinging version of “What A Difference A Day Made.” But with the focus squarely on Okita, *Art Of Life* mostly is predictable, pleasing but uneventful.

—Scott Yanow



**Art Of Life:** Let’s Face The Music And Dance; Both Sides Now; Detour Ahead; Art Of Life; Blue Rose; When She Loved Me; Some Other Time; Smile; What A Difference A Day Made; Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye. (45:24)

**Personnel:** May Okita, vocals; Josh Nelson, piano; Larry Koonse, guitar.

**Ordering info:** [originarts.com](http://originarts.com)

## Ken Fowser *Right On Time*

POST-TONE 8189

★★★★½

Tenor saxophonist Ken Fowser’s latest is a pleasantly rollicking, worn-in effort. No one’s reinventing the wheel here on these straightahead jams, but that’s not necessarily the point.

Grooves are the trenches over which Fowser floats, with Ed Cherry ably keeping order on rhythm guitar, as Willie Jones III sits behind the kit. Functioning more as a rudder for the group than as an additional melodic element, Brian Charette’s organ seems to be as much a leader as Fowser’s tenor, which occasionally finds itself subsumed in the horn section. It’s all a seemingly balanced recording, but something elemental about the instruments and arrangements just throw things out of whack a smidge.

“No Filter” is a good ride for all involved, coasting along gently with each player getting in a solo—and pulling them off. “Don’t Let Life Pass You By” is a gentle little ballad, but one might think Fowser would take more of the lead on a song like “Fowser Time” that uses his own name.

This isn’t to say the album doesn’t cut up at all. By closer “Knights Of The Round,” Jones contributes a drum solo so rambunctious, listeners might wonder where that vibrancy was during the previous 50 minutes.

—Anthony Dean-Harris



## Joyce DiDonato *Songplay*

WARNER CLASSICS/

ERATO 0190295534387

★★★★★

Several of *Songplay*’s selections are staples from *24 Italian Songs and Arias*—repertoire that lives in near infamy among classical vocal students for its universally familiar stagnancy. Yet, both these and selections from the Great American Songbook fit well with the underlying drivers of Joyce DiDonato’s latest work: remembering not to take things too seriously and musing over the ever-discussed, but often forgotten, meaning of love.

From the opening seconds of the aria “Se Tu M’ami/Star Vicino,” DiDonato’s intent to revive the playful, liberating potential behind singing about love immediately is apparent. A conventionally delivered piano motif teases dread of an uninspired performance before giving way to a flourish of light percussion, spanning gentle floor toms, shaker and woodblock alongside a subtly plucked bass. All of these parts jump in under Craig Terry’s fluid piano, instantly transforming the aria from stiff to sultry—a quality only enhanced by DiDonato’s pristine vocals. The ensemble’s performance is nothing short of exemplary, too, begging return plays of DiDonato’s adventurous exploration of the canon.

—Kira Grunenberg



**Songplay:** Se Tu M’ami/Star Vicino; Tu Lo Sai; (I Am Afraid) The Masquerade Is Over; Lullaby Of Birdland; Will He Like Me?; Amarilli, Mia Bella; Lean Away; Col Piacer Della Mia Fedè; Vedrò Con Mio Diletto; (In My) Solitude; Quella Fiamma; Caro Mio Ben; Nel Cor Più Non Mi Sento; With A Song In My Heart. (70:49)

**Personnel:** Joyce DiDonato, vocals; Craig Terry, piano; Chuck Israels, bass; Jimmy Madison, drums; Lautaro Greco, bandoneon; Charlie Porter, trumpet, flugelhorn.

**Ordering info:** [warnerclassics.com](http://warnerclassics.com)

**Right On Time:** Stand Clear Of The Closing Doors; Samba For Joe Birn; Duck And Cover; No Filter; Don’t Let Life Pass You By; On My Way; Keep Doing What You’re Doing; Fowser Time; A Poem For Eliane; Knights Of The Round. (58:02)

**Personnel:** Ken Fowser, tenor saxophone; Steve Davis, trombone; Joe Magnarelli, trumpet; Brian Charette, organ; Ed Cherry, guitar; Willie Jones III, drums.

**Ordering info:** [post-tone.com](http://post-tone.com)