

Holiday Music To Bring Folks Together

by KEVIN WHITEHEAD

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This Thanksgiving there were a lot of articles online about arming yourself with good information before arguing politics at seasonal dinners. With so much contention in the air, maybe music can help bring folks with opposing views together.

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. With so much contention in air around holiday get-togethers, jazz critic Ken Whitehead wonders if music might help bring together folks with opposing views. He has some listening and viewing recommendations for seasonal dinners.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "TEEN TOWN")

KEVIN WHITEHEAD, BYLINE: Chris Biesterfeldt on mandolin, Playing Weather Report's "Teen Town," by Jaco Pastorius. Jazz hounds and fans of fancy string pickings don't always get on at family gatherings, but maybe they could bond over Biesterfeldt's CD "Urban Mandolin."

Mostly, he plays diverse jazz tunes, bebop classics, to organ group funk, to '70s fusion. His band is a bare bones trio, where mandolin has to stay busy to fill out the texture.

Chris Biesterfeldt is primarily a guitarist, but he has serious mandolin chops. This is Jimmy Smith's "Ready and Able."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "READY AND ABLE")

WHITEHEAD: A jazz fan listening to that might even wonder what other virtuoso mandolin improvising is out there. You'll never know. We jazz critics like to go on about how Dixieland and the avant-garde have in common, what with all the collective improvising. Their respective fans don't always hear the resemblance, but they can unite in reaction to new music that pokes fun at both camps.

The album "Red Hot" is from the twisted minds of a not quite serious band of serious players. Bassist Moppa Elliott's quartet Mostly Other People Do the Killing.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "MOSTLY OTHER PEOPLE DO THE KILLING")

WHITEHEAD: Peter Evans on trumpet and John Irabagon on saxophone. The tall tale booklet essay for the album "Red Hot" tells of the Brimstone Corner Boys, a western Pennsylvania jazz band wiped out in a 1934 mine disaster. They left behind only some piano parts from which an expanded Mostly Other People Do the Killing seek to re-create their style. As often happens when modern musicians tackle old music, anachronisms abound, letting them satirize contemporary giants like McCoy Tyner and Evan Parker too.

Jazz humor can be dismal but "Red Hot" is kind of inspired, up there with jazz parodies by the Bonzo Dog Band, Willem(ph) Bloker(ph), and singer Jo Stafford's tone-deaf alter ego, Darlene Edwards. The worse it sounds, the better it is. Guests include Dave Taylor on bass trombone, and muted guitar hero Brandon Seabrook on banjo.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "RED HOT")

WHITEHEAD: After dinner you can quiet competitive family members who seek out obscure music videos online. Sit them down to watch four DVDs of recently unearthed early '60s variety shows by singer, comedian, dancer, actor Edie Adams. "Here's Edie," aka, "The Edie Adams Show," has all the dancing and sketch comedy and Vegas razzle you'd expect. But there is also a lot of jazz mixed in: Woody Herman's orchestra, Count Basie or Duke Ellington and some key sidemen sitting in with the house band, Lionel Hampton playing the vibes and juggling drumsticks, John Hendricks scatting, Bobby Darin swinging, and more.

There were two appearances by saxophonist Stan Getz at the peak of his bossa nova fame.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WHITEHEAD: Edie Adams was a good singer who sometimes joins in, duetting with Nancy Wilson or Hoagy Carmichael or cooing wordlessly with Ellington saxophonist Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney.

Watching these shows, younger folk will see jazz really was a TV staple once upon a time, and see how loose, low-budget and vaudeville-like '60s shows could be. They'll also see Don Rickles in a toreador outfit, dancing in a cigar commercial. That should leave the whole gang speechless, letting you enjoy a lull in their always fascinating conversation.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: Kevin Whitehead writes for Point of Departure, Downbeat and eMusic, and is the author of "Why Jazz?" He reviewed "Urban Mandolin," by Chris Biesterfeldt, "Red Hot" by Mostly Other People Do the Killing, and the DVD "Here's Edie."

Coming up, we remember jazz pianist and teacher Jimmy Amadie. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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