

## Voices of Reason

A few singers operate on a level of high distinction where their voices embrace universal hallmarks like hope, love and compassion. This honest expressionism simulates beams of sunshine breaking through dark clouds. The following bunch of recording artists exist at such a lofty height or at least have their moments.

Raised in the African-American church, part of the secular soul scene and civil rights movement of the 1960s, **Mavis Staples** has long asserted that her music is healing. She sings to make people, everyone, smile. Thus the youthful 77-year-old keeps her eye fixed on the prize for all of ***If All I Was Was Black* (Anti- 87557; 34:40 ★★★★★)**, her third album produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy and first featuring him as the only songwriter. Staples' conviction, bound up in her wonderful voice, underscores thoughtful lyrics that fit her own views on American society needing repair and how to go about improving things. Yes, love prevails on the program, though some bitterness over police shootings seeps into "Little Bit." In complement to Staples' measured eloquence, Tweedy's rootsy combination of melody and rhythm make the catchy songs even more memorable.

Ordering info: [anti.com](http://anti.com)

An international star of the famous (or infamous) early 1970s singer-songwriter era, **Yusuf/Cat Stevens** finally hits his stride again on his fourth album since returning to Western pop music after many years away. On ***The Laughing Apple* (Decca/Cat-O-Log 0027220; 33:00 ★★½)**, he reinvents himself even while keeping one foot cemented in his pop past. The warmth and sensitivity of Yusuf's singing remains undeniable and his flair for tuneful writing stays intact. Reunions with *Tea For The Tillerman*-era producer Paul Samwell-Smith and guitarist Alun Davies are all in his favor. Instances of weak sentiment in a lyric are tolerable given the altruism at the center of three new songs and eight new versions of bona fide or wannabe classics out of his songbook.

Ordering info: [decca.com](http://decca.com)

**Leon Russell's** widow says the pianist was "an awkward romantic." A sentimental streak certainly does suffuse his last studio album, ***On A Distant Shore—Deluxe Edition* (Palmetto 2187; 61:51 ★★½)**. In his mid-seventies and closing out a six-decade career in 2016, long-bearded Russell's quickly recognizable voice has lost some of its fullness and strength. Still, he does pretty well by new songs and revisits three lovey-dovey standards he famously wrote:



Mavis Staples

CHRIS STRONG

"This Masquerade," "Hummingbird" and "A Song For You." Arranger Larry Hall, a little heavy-handed with the strings, harks back to the days of Nat Cole with the Nelson Riddle Orchestra.

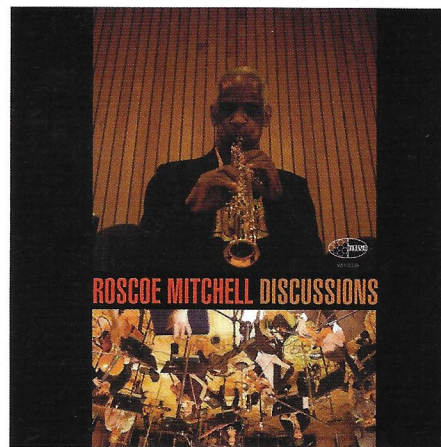
Ordering info: [leonrussellrecords.com](http://leonrussellrecords.com)

British pop-soul's **Joss Stone** is a perfect fit for the role of a mother goddess singing original lyrics about the life-giving properties of nature. Arguably in better, more confident voice than ever before in the studio, she sustains a steady tone of humaneness through five songs on ***Mama Earth* (Stone'd 7533; 30:38 ★★½)**. Equally vital to the appeal of the album are the contributions of the members of her ad hoc group, Project Mama Earth. Cameroonian-born guitarist Etienne Mbappé, guitarist Nitin Sawhney, drummer Jonathan Joseph and keyboardist Jonathan Shorten spontaneously work up compelling universal-African rhythms.

Ordering info: [mascotlabelgroup.com](http://mascotlabelgroup.com)

There's nothing facile or uncomplicated about the romantic interactions that former Levon Helm associates **Larry Campbell** and **Teresa Williams** sing about on their second fine roots album, ***Contraband Love* (Red House 303; 46:13 ★★★★★)**. Drawn to the vocal harmony and rudiments of gospel, blues and country, the married couple give a sense of trying to resolve the disquiet and anxiety of love in Campbell-penned songs such as "The Other Side Of Pain" and "When I Stop Loving You." Beyond vocals and lyrics, the listener can lose oneself in the rumbling flow of Campbell's guitars and a top-grade Woodstock, New York, rhythm section. **DB**

Ordering info: [redhousetrecords.com](http://redhousetrecords.com)



## Roscoe Mitchell *Discussions*

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★★★★

Few composers and improvisers have maintained a creative curiosity and rigor like Roscoe Mitchell, who at 77 seems unstoppable. Encountering an increasing number of commissions has led the reedist to tap into the potential bounty embedded in improvisation efforts from his past, and the music on *Discussions* was sparked by a pair of spontaneous recordings made in 2014 with pianist Craig Taborn and percussionist Kikanju Baku. Scholar Paul Steinbeck enlisted a number of graduate students to transcribe material from those trio albums, and with a raft of Bay Area musicians, Mitchell oversaw the birth of powerful new pieces codified from improvisations.

On most of these works Mitchell sits out, allowing the transcribed passages to blossom and teasing out dark-hued melodic shapes that dart by in an instant within the source material, but here linger among the lovely, haunting orchestrations. While "I'll See You Out There" hangs in the air ominously, "Cracked Roses" ripples with a percussive thrust and the dance of pointillistic brass and string stabs. The new collection does include some bracing improvised material, including two snaking duets between Mitchell, on soprano, and flutist Wilfrido Terrazas. And two orchestral improvisations flow with refreshing clarity, as the ensemble members reveal strong listening skills and refined interactions, with Mitchell's searing lines frequently functioning like a high-powered flashlight guiding the performance forward. —Peter Margasak

**Discussions:** Cascade; I'll See You Out There; Discussions I; Cracked Roses; Discussions II; Frenzy House; Home Screen; Who Dat. (65:46)

**Personnel:** Roscoe Mitchell, soprano saxophone; Steed Cowart, conductor; Wilfrido Terrazas, flutes; James Fei, electronics; Stacey Pelinka, flute; Jesse Barrett, oboe; Rachel Condry, clarinet, bass clarinet; Erin Irvine, bassoon; William Harvey, trumpet; Andrew Strain, trombone; Tiffany Bayly, tuba; William Winant, Scott Siler, percussion; Jordan Glenn, drum set; Brett Carso, piano; Roy T. Melan, Mia Bella D'Augelli, violins; Clio Tilton, viola; Crystal Pascucci, cello; Richard Worn, bass.

Ordering info: [widehive.com](http://widehive.com)