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# The 50 Best Jazz Saxophonists Of

The saxophone remains an iconic instrument in jazz, mastered by many musical geniuses. uDiscovermu has compiled a list of the top 50 best jazz saxophonists of all time.

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By Charles Waring



There's no doubt that, if he were alive today, 19th-century Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Sax would be extremely surprised – and pleased, too, no doubt – at how the saxophone, which he invented and then patented back in 1846, has become universally popular, and wa



in defining the sound of a 20th-century-born musical style called jazz. Its status as one of the genre's most important instruments is undisputed; even the most cursory glance at the list of musicians hailed as the best jazz saxophonists of all time reveals a number of one-of-a-kind players who have helped take the music in new directions.

## The Top 10 Best Jazz Saxophonists Of All Time



Yet when he died in poverty, in 1894, Sax, who invented several other wind instruments besides the saxophone – all of which bore his name – would have seen that the saxophone had been adopted mostly by military marching bands, though his hope that it would feature prominently in classical music orchestras was not to be fully realised.

Though marching-band music was part of jazz's foundation, it was the trumpet, rather than the saxophone, that first took the spotlight. But the saxophone (the tenor and alto varieties) began to play an important role in the big-band swing era, when Johnny Hodges and **Count Basie** Hawkins emerged as the best jazz saxophonists of their era.

But it was altoist **Charlie Parker** who made the biggest impact with a technically challenging and harmonically progressive new form of jazz called bebop, in the mid-40s. Parker's influence was pervasive and his explorations helped to change the course of jazz, transforming it from dance music to art. In Parker's wake came a raft of virtuoso sax symbols during the 50s and 60s.

including tenor heavyweights **Stan Getz**, Sonny Rollins and **John Coltrane**, all of whom raised saxophone playing to new, higher, levels of artistry while pushing jazz ever forwards.

Though this tenor trio's influence (along with Parker's) is powerful and continues to shape saxophone's narrative in jazz today, almost 60 years later, there have nevertheless been many more talented horn blowers – and there are many more still emerging – all armed with a unique sound, style and approach to their instrument.

The saxophone, like the trumpet, remains an iconic instrument in jazz, and one that, through its indelible musical associations, has become totally synonymous with the genre.

Here, then, is our blow-by-blow countdown of the 50 best jazz saxophonists of all time.

## 50: Gato Barbieri (1932-2016)

With his raw, wailing tenor sax sound, Argentina-born Leandro “Gato” Barbieri ploughed a Coltrane-esque avant-garde furrow in the late 60s before making a more accessible fusion of music that embraced his Latin American roots. From the 70s onwards, Barbieri leaned towards smooth jazz settings for his music, though his brooding tenor saxophone never lost its intensity.



## 49: Pepper Adams (1930-1986)

Baritone specialist Park "Pepper" Adams came from Michigan and was a stalwart of the Detroit scene, where he played with Donald Byrd in the late 50s and early 60s. An insideman due to the deep sonorities and dark textures he created on his baritone sax, was an integral member of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra between 1966 and 19

Pepper Adams, Baritone Sax & Clark Terry - "Straight, No Chaser" (T. Monk),



## 48: Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1935-1977)

Regarded as an eccentric blind maverick by some for functioning as a one-man band (he could play three horns at once and **had a variety of exotic instruments dangling from his neck and shoulders**), Kirk's multi-tasking skills meant that his prowess on the saxes has been overlooked. He was, though, a superb tenor saxophonist who was at home with hard bop, modal jazz and R&B, and easily earns his place among the world's best jazz saxophonists.

Rahsaan Roland Kirk - Volunteered Slavery (Montreux 1972)



## 47: Pharoah Sanders (born 1940)

An acolyte of John Coltrane (with whom he played between 1965 and '67), tenor/soprano saxophonist and flautist Sanders helped to bring both a cosmic and deep spiritual vibe in the late 60s and early 70s. A prolific purple patch at the Impulse! label between 1969 and 1974 (which yielded ten LPs) cemented his place in pantheon of best jazz saxophonists. Sanders' music also tapped into the music of other cultures.

Pharoah Sanders (Live Video - 1968)



## 46: Gerry Mulligan (1927-1996)

Mulligan's resonant baritone sax appeared on countless recording sessions during his fertile career, including those by **Miles Davis**, **Billie Holiday** and Dave Brubeck. Mulligan was an astute arranger and skilled innovator too, conceiving a piano-less quartet with Chet Baker in 1950. He was integral to the more relaxed West Coast cool style.

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### Gerry Mulligan Quartet - Open Country



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## 45: Michael Brecker (1949-2007)

Hailing from Pennsylvania, Brecker was a tenor saxophonist who was raised on a diet of rock and roll so that, consequently, he never acknowledged musical boundaries. He played a raft of pop and rock sessions in the 70s (for everyone from **Steely Dan** to Art Garfunkel) as well as co-leading the funky Brecker Brothers Band with his younger sibling, Randy. In the end of his life, he made records with more of a straight-ahead jazz feel.

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### Michael Brecker - Round Midnight (Solo)





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## 44: Jan Garbarek (born 1947)

This eminent Norwegian composer and saxophonist (who's a master of both the tenor soprano varieties of sax) has enjoyed a long and fecund association with the ECM label he's been since 1970. It was largely through his alliance with Keith Jarrett in the 70s (as part of the pianist's European Quartet) that gained him an international audience. His sound is both lyrical and haunting.

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Jan Garbarek - Mission: To Be Where I Am



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## 43: Joe Lovano (born 1952)

The youngest-born entry among the world's best jazz saxophonists, Ohio-born Lovano plays a clutch of different instruments, though his name is synonymous with the tenor

saxophone. The sound he projects is substantial but also athletic and imbued with a tugging soulfulness. Lovano is a supremely versatile musician who has played in a wide range of different musical contexts and whose influences range from bop to African music.

## 42: Arthur Blythe (1940-2017)

Brought up on a strict diet of rhythm'n'blues, this Los Angeles altoist played in the bands of Gil Evans and Chico Hamilton before making his mark as a proponent of avant-garde jazz in the late 70s. Even so, while his music always looked forward, Blythe never lost sight of the traditions of the best jazz saxophonists before him. As well as having a distinctive and emotionally-intense reed sound, Blythe was also a fine composer.

## 41: Jimmy Heath (born 1926)

One of three noted jazz musician siblings (his brothers are drummer Percy and bassist Heath), this Philly saxophonist started his career in the 40s and switched from alto to tenor sax to try and avoid comparisons with fellow bebopper Charlie Parker (Heath was dubbed Little Bird for a time). Heath has played with all the jazz greats (from Miles Davis and Duke Ellington to Freddie Hubbard), and continues to perform to this day.

## 40: Charles Lloyd (born 1938)

From Memphis, Tennessee, Lloyd got his first saxophone at the age of nine and, by the time he was 15, he was playing in the touring bands of blues mavens **Howlin' Wolf** and **BB King**. A move to New York City in 1956, signaled a change of direction for the saxophonist, who, four years later, ended up in the West Coast jazz scene.

replacing Eric Dolphy in Chico Hamilton's group. Lloyd began his solo career at the s and his absorption of rock elements helped his music go down well with a wider audi actively performing today, Lloyd's music is edgier and more exploratory than it was in

## 39: Yusef Lateef (1920-2013)

Arriving in the world as William Huddleston, Lateef pioneered the incorporation of n elements from other cultures into his music. He was particularly fond of Eastern mus well as playing tenor saxophone, which he played in a hard bop style, he was a fluent and oboist.

## 38: Harold Land (1928-2001)

A member of the trailblazing Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet, this Texas tenor titan was at the birth of hard bop in the early 50s and later based himself in Los Angeles, where he developed a more vigorous alternative to the West Coast's omnipresent cool sound. He later teamed up with vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson for an acclaimed series of collaborations. Like many of the best jazz saxophonists, Land's brooding tenor sound, with its intense level of expression, was indebted to Coltrane.

## 37: Lee Konitz (born 1927)

Unique among the best jazz saxophonists to come up in the late 40s and early 50s, Konitz was one of the few altoists who wasn't infected by Charlie Parker's bebop sound. Instead, he elected to plough his own distinctive furrow. An ingenious improviser who weaved long, flowing melodic lines, Konitz's playing has been described as "ethereal" and "otherworldly".

flowing skeins of melody while inserting subtle accent changes, Konitz was initially very much a cool school adherent, but in later years explored the avant-garde.

## 36: Illinois Jacquet (1919-2004)

Famed for his staccato honking sound and catchy riffs, Jean-Baptiste “Illinois” Jacquet was an alto player from Louisiana who was raised in Texas and then moved to LA. It was there in 1939, where he was recruited by bandleader Lionel Hampton (who persuaded Jacquet to switch his alto for a tenor sax). Jacquet’s rambunctious wild solo on Hampton’s ‘Flying Home’ was widely perceived as representing the first manifestation on record of what would develop into the rhythm’n’blues.

## 35: Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis (1922-1986)

From Culver City, California, Davis – given the name Lockjaw because his saxophone almost glued to his mouth during his ultra-long solos – could play in a range of style his calling card was a driving, blues-drenched hard bop. In the early 60s, he made a s combative but affable duet albums with his musical sparring partner, Johnny Griffin.

## 34: Al Cohn (1925-1988)

Alvin Cohn enjoyed a long and fruitful collaboration with fellow tenor Zoot Sims – ar together, the pair were considered by Jack Kerouac to be among the best jazz saxophoc the 50s, and were asked to play on his 1959 poetry album *Blues And Haikus*. Cohn ga notoriety playing alongside Sims and **Stan Getz** in Woody Herman’s Second Herd du

late 40s, and, despite being born and raised in Brooklyn, he came to be associated with the West Coast cool sound. Cohn's signature was a bright but full-bodied saxophone tone which he poured rivulets of mellifluous melody.

### 33: Benny Carter (1907-2003)

Harlem-born Carter's main instrument was the alto sax, but he was also adept on the piano and clarinet. He made his recording debut in 1928 as a sideman, but, by the 30s, was leading his own swing band for which he was writing sophisticated charts that resulted in him arranging for the likes of **Duke Ellington** and **Count Basie**. A master of the swinging saxophone.

## 32: Gary Bartz (born 1940)

From Baltimore, Maryland, Bartz plays both alto and soprano saxophones. Making his recording debut with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers in 1965, he was already recording leader for Milestone when Miles Davis recruited him in 1970. Though in the early 70s he style gravitated to a more exploratory kind of jazz, his records became smoother and more melodic as the decade progressed. He will be remembered among the best jazz saxophonists for his soulful playing which combines flawless technique with emotional depth.

## 31: Sam Rivers (1923-2011)

Unique among the world's best jazz saxophonists, Rivers was a multi-talented instrumentalist who played bass clarinet, flute and piano besides excelling on tenor and soprano saxophone.

He appeared on many jazz fans' radar when he played with Miles Davis in 1964. After that, he recorded for Blue Note, moving from an advanced hard-bop style that later edged toward avant-garde.

## 30: Ike Quebec (1918-1963)

With his breathy, intimate tone, New Jersey native Quebec is mainly remembered as a seductive ballad player whose career started in the 40s. He spent a long time playing with Cab Calloway and also cut sides with **Ella Fitzgerald** and Coleman Hawkins before joining the Blue Note in 1959, where he recorded some fine albums before his premature death from lung cancer, aged 44.

## 29: Lou Donaldson (born 1926)

This North Carolinian, Charlie Parker-influenced tenorist started to make his mark in the mid-1950s where his bluesy, soulful and increasingly funkified hard bop style resulted in a slew of LPs for the Blue Note label. Donaldson also sat in as a sideman on notable sessions by **Thelonious Monk**, Clifford Brown, Art Blakey and **Jimmy Smith**.

## 28: Stanley Turrentine (1934-2000)

Though he was dubbed The Sugar Man, there was nothing sickly sweet about this Pittsburgh-born tenor man's robust and earthy style, whose DNA revealed blues cries, gospel calls and the influence of R&B saxophonist Illinois Jacquet. Turrentine played a mixture of hard bop and soul-jazz in the 60s at Blue Note; later, in the 70s, at CTI Records, he fused bop with funk.

Latin and pop music. Even among the best jazz saxophonists, few could play as soulfully as Stanley Turrentine.

## 27: Paul Desmond (1924-1977)

A key member of the Dave Brubeck Quartet between 1951 and 1957 (he wrote the group's most famous tune, the big crossover hit 'Take Five'), this San Francisco-born alto saxophonist's light delivery helped to define the West Coast cool sound. Amusingly, Desmond once described his saxophone sound to a dry martini.

## 26: Earl Bostic (1913-1965)

From Tulsa, Oklahoma, alto saxophonist Eugene Earl Bostic got his big break in vibraphonist Lionel Hampton's band just before World War II. His fat, earthy tone and fluid, blues-style had a huge impact on a young John Coltrane, who cut his teeth in Bostic's band in the early 50s. Bostic was extremely popular in the field of post-war R&B, racking up seven hits.

## 25: Sidney Bechet (1897-1959)

Born in New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, Bechet started out on the clarinet and in at an early age before switching to the then-unfashionable and rarely heard soprano saxophone after discovering one on tour in a London junk shop in 1920. Soon after, h his first recordings and caught the ear with his reedy soprano blowing, which had a t vibrato and emotional intensity. The only entry in this list of the best jazz saxophoni

have been born in the 1800s, Bechet has the distinction of being the first significant saxophonist in jazz.

## 24: Eric Dolphy (1928-1964)

Though Dolphy died at a relatively young age (he was 36 when he tragically succumbed to fatal diabetic coma), the reverberations from his pathfinding music can still be felt to this day. He was a virtuoso of the flute and bass clarinet but was also a fabulous alto sax player with a unique approach, and first came to the attention of the wider public when he began playing with Coltrane in the early 60s. Dolphy's Blue Note LP, *Out To Lunch*, remains a touchstone of avant-garde jazz and his influence has extended beyond the genre.

## 23: Albert Ayler (1936-1970)

This Ohio free jazz and avant-garde saxophonist (who played the tenor, alto and soprano varieties) didn't live to see his 35th birthday, but today, almost 50 years after his death, his music and influence still casts a huge shadow in jazz. Drawing on gospel, blues cries and marching-band music, Ayler patented a singular saxophone style that was raw, raucous and driven by a primal energy.

## 22: Zoot Sims (1925-1985)

Californian tenor maestro John "Zoot" Sims took Lester Young's sleek and mellow approach to jazz improv and fused it with the language of hard bop while filtering it through a cool West Coast sensibility. He played in many big bands (including those of Artie Shaw, Stan Kenton and Woody Herman) before settling into a long career with the Count Basie Orchestra.

and Buddy Rich) and was always conducive to working on collaborative projects with saxophonists.

## 21: Gene Ammons (1925-1974)

Dubbed The Boss, Windy City native Gene “Jug” Ammons might have been the scion boogie-woogie piano meister Albert Ammons, but he was drawn to the tenor saxophone. He began his career in the 40s. An adherent of hard bop but with a style packed with blues, Ammons was a prolific recording artist who embraced funkified soul-jazz in the 70s.

## 20: Benny Golson (born 1929)

At 88, Benny Golson is still going strong and blowing hard. The Philly-born tenorist first made his mark with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers in the late 50s, and, as well as being noted for his sublime, hard bop-inflected playing, he was a fine composer, responsible for the classic tunes 'I Remember Clifford', 'Killer Joe' and 'Along Came Betty'.

## 19: Cannonball Adderley (1928-1975)

Florida-born altoist Adderley caused a sensation when he visited New York in 1955, and was soon snapped up to record the first of many albums during the next two decades. Like many of the best jazz saxophonists of his era, he was a disciple of Charlie Parker, but nevertheless forged his own style, a soulful amalgam of bop, gospel and blues influences. He played on Miles Davis' iconic modal jazz manifesto *Kind Of Blue* in 1959, but thereafter

became a purveyor of soul jazz. In the late 60s and early 70s, Adderley's music became exploratory.

## 18: Hank Crawford (1934-2009)

A Memphis-born musician, Benny “Hank” Crawford, was one of the premier soul-jazz saxophonists of the 60s and 70s. His big break came when he joined **Ray Charles'** band in 1958 (where he originally played baritone sax), which helped to launch his solo career. Atlantic Records. Crawford’s expressive, blues-inflected sound exerted a profound influence on a contemporary alto great, David Sanborn.

## 17: Sonny Stitt (1924-1982)

Dubbed the Lone Wolf, Boston-born Stitt started out as an alto saxophonist and began recording career at the dawn of bebop during the close of the 40s. His florid, mellifluous has often been compared with Charlie Parker's (many accused Stitt of copying Parker) but he began to develop his own voice after switching to the tenor sax. A fearless improviser

## 16: Ben Webster (1909-1973)

Though he was affectionately called The Brute, Ben Webster's forceful style of playing was tempered with a high degree of tenderness, especially on ballads. With its breathy tirades, virile tone and broad vibrato, Webster's bluesy tenor saxophone sound is one of the most readily identifiable in jazz. He spent several years as a featured soloist in Duke Ellington's band and also recorded with Dizzy Gillespie, Johnny Hodges and Lionel Hampton.

## 15: Wayne Shorter (born 1933)

This Newark, New Jersey, composer and saxophonist (who alternates between soprano and tenor) enjoyed mainstream fame as part of fusion giants Weather Report between 1972 and 1986. Schooled in Art Blakey's "hard bop academy", Shorter then played a significant role as composer/player in Miles Davis' Second Great Quintet between 1962 and 1968. His sound is powerful yet elegant.

## 14: Ornette Coleman (1930-2015)

Texas-born Coleman caused ructions in the jazz world when he arrived in New York in 1957 armed with a plastic alto saxophone with which he unleashed the revolutionary concept of free jazz. Though he liberated jazz both melodically and harmonically, Coleman's crying alto was always steeped in the sound of the blues.

## 13: Jackie McLean (1931-2006)

With its lissom Charlie Parker-influenced inflections, McLean's sinuous alto saxophone caught the ear of Miles Davis in 1951, and the trumpet legend included the then-16-year-old saxophonist on his *Dig!* LP. From 1955, McLean started recording under his own name, impressing as a young exponent of hard bop. As the 50s led into the 60s, McLean began to expand his expressive palette and musical horizons by venturing into more exploratory avant-garde territory. His legacy remains one of the most important among the world's best saxophonists.

## 12: Johnny Hodges (1907-1970)

Johnny Hodges made his name in Duke Ellington's band, which he joined in 1928. His soulful alto saxophone sound, with its wide, emotive vibrato – which Ellington once “was so beautiful that it brought tears to the eyes” – was featured on a raft of the Duke's recordings, including ‘A Prelude To A Kiss’. Both Charlie Parker and John Coltrane were

## 11: Joe Henderson (1937-2001)

Henderson's tenor sound was unmistakable: loud, robust and virile. Originally from (Henderson first made his mark as an exponent of hard bop at Blue Note in the early 60s, also recorded with Horace Silver (it's Henderson's solo you can hear on Silver's 'Song for My Father'). Henderson also added Latin elements to his music and, in the 70s, embarked on a freer, more exploratory mode of jazz.

## 10: Johnny Griffin (1928-2008)

Though diminutive in terms of his physical stature, the Chicago-born Griffin's powerful tenor saxophone earned him the nickname Little Giant. A major exponent of hard bop, he began his solo career in the 50s and eventually moved to Europe, where he stayed until his death. He was a fearless improviser with an imposing but mobile sound.

## 9: Hank Mobley (1930-1986)

Born in Georgia and raised in New Jersey, Mobley came on the radar of jazz fans in the 50s as a charter member of The Jazz Messengers, before embarking on a solo career that produced 25 albums for Blue Note. Less belligerent in his attack than Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, though not as smooth or silky as Stan Getz, Mobley's sonorous, well-rounded sound earned him the title The Middleweight Champion Of The Tenor Saxophone.

## 8: Art Pepper (1925-1982)

A leading light of the post-war West Coast US jazz scene, Pepper's rise to stardom began in the bands of Stan Kenton. Like so many jazz musicians that worked in the 50s including many of the best jazz saxophonists of the era – Pepper's career was blighted by drug addiction. But even several spells in prison couldn't taint the lyrical beauty of his distinctive alto saxophone sound, whose roots were in bebop.

## 7: Coleman Hawkins (1904-1969)

Nicknamed Bean or Hawk, this influential Missouri-born tenor saxophonist was crucial to the development of the saxophone as a viable solo instrument. His 1939 recording of 'Body and Soul', with an extended solo that improvised on, around and beyond the song's main melody, was a game-changer that opened the door for musicians such as Charlie Parker. Though he was associated with **big-band swing**, Hawkins played in more of a bop style from the late 1940s onwards. His sound was big, breathy and beefy.

## 6: Lester Young (1909-1959)

From Woodville, Mississippi, Young – a hipster who spoke in his own “jazz speak” arose to prominence during the swing era of the 30s, playing with Count Basie and Fletcher Henderson. His smooth, mellow tone and airy, lightly flowing style was hugely influential inspiring tenor players that followed, including Stan Getz, Zoot Sims and Al Cohn. Young is regarded as the Poet Laureate of the tenor sax.

## 5: Dexter Gordon (1923-1990)

Standing at a towering six feet six inches, it was no wonder that this Californian doct was dubbed Long Tall Dexter. Gordon was the first significant bebop tenor saxophoni began his recording career in the 40s. Though he could swing with aplomb, Gordon's ballads, which allowed his rich, emotive tone to convey a poignant lyricism.

## 4: Stan Getz (1927-1991)

Though originating in Philadelphia, Getz became the pre-eminent tenor saxophonist West Coast cool school scene of the 50s. His alluring, beautifully lyrical tone, combin his velvet-smooth, effortless style – à la Lester Young – earned him the nickname Th A supremely versatile musician, Getz could play bop, bossa nova (which he helped to the US mainstream, not least on **the album *Getz/Gilberto***) and fusion, and also gue pop records.

### **3: Sonny Rollins (born 1930)**

A form of lung disease has silenced Rollins' tenor saxophone since 2012, but he remains one of the last great saxophonists of jazz's golden age. Born Walter Theodore Rollins in New York City in 1930, his career took off in the 50s and his big, robust sound, combined with his gift for melodic improvisation, gained him the nickname Saxophone Colossus.

### **2: John Coltrane (1926-1967)**

Coltrane rewrote the book on tenor saxophone playing and also helped to popularise soprano version of the instrument. Starting out as a bar-walking blues player, he emerged as the most significant jazz saxophonist after Charlie Parker. Coltrane rose to fame with Miles Davis' group during the mid-to-late 50s, while enjoying a parallel solo career that eventually produced *A Love Supreme*, one of the most iconic jazz albums of all time. His florid, expressive style was often likened to "sheets of sound". Coltrane's music was always evolving and progressed from hard bop through to modal, spiritual jazz, and the avant-garde.

## 1: Charlie Parker (1920-1955)

Topping the list of the best jazz saxophonists ever is the man fans referred to simply as "Bird", despite he had lived beyond 34 years of age, who knows what he could have accomplished. The Kansas City altoist was one of the principal architects of the post-war jazz revolution known as bebop, which emerged in New York in the mid-40s and would shape the trajectory of the genre for the years to come. Parker's ornate style and prodigious technique, which combined melodic fluency with chromatic and harmonic ingenuity, proved profoundly influential. Though he has been dead for over six decades, no saxophonist yet has eclipsed him in terms of importance.

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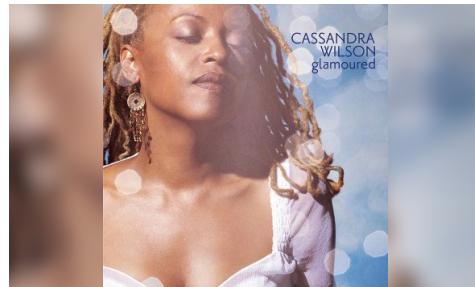
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