

# The best Canadian jazz albums of 2016

The last 12 months saw the release of a bumper crop of Canadian jazz.



*PETER HUM, OTTAWA CITIZEN*

[More from Peter Hum, Ottawa Citizen](http://ottawacitizen.com/author/peterhum88) ([HTTP://OTTAWACITIZEN.COM/AUTHOR/PETERHUM88](http://ottawacitizen.com/author/peterhum88))

Published on: December 23, 2016 | Last Updated: December 24, 2016 9:00 AM EST



The Joe Sullivan Big Band, one or several powerful jazz large ensembles in Montreal.

When the jazz world gets its usual retrospectives, Canadian music generally gets elbowed aside by the

## glut of albums out of New York and beyond.

But for Canadian listeners who knew where to get their jazz fix, music made in Toronto, Montreal, Calgary and even Ottawa distinguished itself in 2016. Canadian jazz players cranked out some scintillating recordings that put original compositions front and centre. Between them, 2016 year's best jazz albums surveyed the full range of jazz, from hard-swinging bop to electric jazz to rarefied chamber music that also embraced improvising.

Plus, this was the year that even produced a fine jazz CD called The Great Regina Pizza Debate.

While the tastemakers who hand out Polaris Prizes and the country's main jazz radio broadcasts may pass over the dozen albums below, fans of creative, in-the-moment music should seek them out. As a bonus, there are six honourable mentions, because that's how good a year it was for Canadian jazz.

### 1. Unfamiliar Surroundings (Perry Lake Records)

Joe Sullivan Big Band

Montreal trumpeter, composer and bandleader Sullivan says that his new two-CD set was sparked by his "nostalgic" love for the classic big bands led by greats such as Quincy Jones and Thad Jones (no relation). Still, Unfamiliar Surroundings feels fresh and even over-sized, brimming with Sullivan's original composing voice and consummate craftsmanship, spread out over three ambitious suites. Vigorous improvisers such as Montreal hornmen Al Mclean, André Leroux, Donny Kennedy and Jean Fréchette, as well as Toronto guitar star Lorne Lofsky, sound inspired.



1 RECOMMEND



Make smarter decisions

SIGN UP FREE



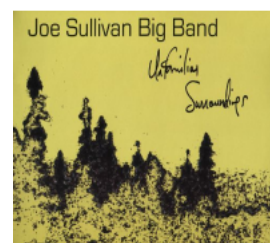
# Joe Sullivan Big Band: Unfamiliar Surroundings



By **JACK BOWERS**  
August 10, 2017  
1,334 Views



*Unfamiliar Surroundings*, a well-designed two-CD set by trumpeter [Joe Sullivan](#)'s all-star ensemble from north of the border, consists of three disparate suites, two on Disc 1, the other on Disc 2. If the surroundings seem unfamiliar, the music is not, as it honors the legendary bellwethers of the Big Band Era without echoing any of them. Sullivan is a modern big band composer / arranger in the best sense of the phrase, writing music that is at ease in the twenty-first century as it carries on the time-honored jazz traditions of creative improvisation and emphatic swing. The presumption is that this is the sort of path that Ellington or Kenton may have followed had they lived to see this day.



SLIDESHOW

Be advised at the outset, however, that digesting Sullivan's music requires a robust musical appetite; the listener should be ready to unwind on a cozy chair or couch to savor such elongated themes as the "Prelude" to *October Suite* (10:58) or "The Waiting Game," the opening movement from *Suite Montage* (17:34). While the various other movements are relatively more concise, none is briefer than "Refuge" (4:45), the fifth and final movement of *Suite Montage*. That suite, by the way, comprises the entirety of Disc 2, whereas Disc 1 is bisected by the *October Suite* and *Suite Laurentides*, each of which encompasses three movements.

Although the term "suite" is generally used to denote a series of reciprocal motifs, Sullivan's essays, even though conceived as interconnected parts, can easily stand alone as discrete compositions. In either case it is the music that is decisive, and Sullivan's themes are as a rule sharp and engaging. The *October Suite*'s "Prelude" opens gently before shifting into a higher gear to accommodate emphatic solos by pianist [Andre White](#) and guitarist [Lorne Lofsky](#). While the second movement isn't as "Off Kilter" as the name implies, tenor [Al Mclean](#)'s frenzied solo lends credence to the sentiment before bassist [Alec Walkington](#) strides forward to calm things down. "Let's Go," which follows, is a fast-paced swinger with ample shouting by brass and reeds undergirding crisp solos by drummer [Dave Lang](#) and trombonist [Jean-Nicolas Trottier](#).

That leads to the picturesque *Suite Laurentides*, whose components are "The Grackle" (a groovy foxtrot on which Sullivan [flugel] and Mclean solo); the shadowy "Nightfall" (White, piano; Jean Frechette, baritone sax), and "Unfamiliar Surroundings," another burner whose assertive solos are delivered by trumpeter [Aron Doyle](#) and tenor [Andre Leroux](#). Unlike *October* or *Laurentides*, the *Suite Montage* has five movements: "The Waiting Game," "A Lullaby," "Montage #3," "The Captain's Log" and "Refuge." On the first, Frechette's bass clarinet and Lang's drums introduce the seductive minor-key theme, which precedes bold and effusive statements by Leroux, trumpeter [Dave Mossing](#) and alto [Remi Bolduc](#). [Donny Kennedy](#)'s open-hearted alto is showcased on the far from slumberous "Lullaby," Lofsky on the Latin-leaning "Montage #3," Mclean (soprano) on the undulating "Captain's Log." Sullivan returns to share blowing space with Lofsky on the bright and easygoing finale, "Refuge."

Thanks to Sullivan's admirable charts and his squadron of talented teammates, *Unfamiliar Surroundings* goes far beyond "suite" music to present a listening experience that entices the ear as it enlivens the heart.