

# Pop and rock music in 2011

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The past year was tumultuous on a global scale. There were mass uprisings throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Riots erupted in Britain over the summer amidst increasing social tensions. The Occupy Wall Street movement resonated with millions of people throughout the country and internationally.

Social misery is on the rise: unemployment has risen over the past year, wages are being driven down and social services are under attack. The Obama administration deepened the assault on democratic rights in the US, and expanded the imperialist wars of the Bush era into Libya, Pakistan and Yemen.

Hardly any of this, however, finds reflection as of yet in the pop music scene. The Billboard Top 20 is littered with the over-produced music of groups and individuals who have little of substance to say. For the most part, they sing about their own “troubles with fame,” fixate on their own navels, croon tepid love songs, or embody the worst features of crass money-worship (as is the tendency in hip-hop in particular). From most of this music, one could get little sense of what it was like to live (or love or ache or be angry) in 2011.

Setting out a list of favorite recordings in the prevailing climate is a difficult task. Meaningful works are in short supply. In addition to this, a lack of access to many international releases also presents significant limitations. Any list of the “best” or “most interesting” works is inevitably incomplete.

The albums chosen below all have something of value to offer, but none are entirely satisfying. To be sure, individual songs and certain themes and musical elements are quite moving. Each demonstrates a high level of artistic talent, honesty and seriousness. But much remains missing.

In no particular order, we felt these were the strongest albums released in 2011:

*Whokill* - Tune-Yards  
*Let England Shake* - PJ Harvey  
*Hurry Up, We're Dreaming* - M83  
*Stone Rollin'* - Raphael Saadiq  
*Kapputt* - Destroyer  
*Bad As Me* - Tom Waits  
*Days* - Real Estate  
*What Were You Hoping For?* - Van Hunt

Tune-Yards' *Whokill* seemed one of the best all-around efforts. It was one of the few albums that exhibited a sense of urgency and protest about the state of the world. It is a spirited and energetic work and one of the few to treat serious themes—war, police brutality, social inequality—without succumbing to melancholy and pessimism.

The albums by Destroyer, M83, and Real Estate are warm and mellifluous. Almost every song on the three albums unfolds in an interesting way, driven either by dense percussion (particularly M83), intriguing brass orchestration (Destroyer), or melodic bass and guitars (Real Estate), and songs often possess expressive layers of electronic instrumentation. At times, however, one feels a disproportionate amount of energy has been devoted to technical experimentation and production.

The lyrics of Dan Bejar of Destroyer are sometimes needlessly obscure. In his least interesting moments, Bejar writes his lyrics in a grey area of ironic, stream-of-conscious musings. A lack of clarity and more fully developed ideas detract from an otherwise beautiful sounding album.

Real Estate has created perhaps the warmest sounding album of all, driven by muted vocals and guitar-centered melodies. But while their songcraft is of a high level, the themes and lyrics of their songs at times become too nostalgic and remain confined in well-worn paths about love found and love lost.

Along with Tune-Yards, the albums by Raphael Saadiq, Van Hunt, PJ Harvey, and Tom Waits were generally more focused and insightful. Van Hunt and Saadiq both work within the R&B tradition, but bring an inventiveness and a sensitivity to social life which has been sorely lacking. Saadiq, in particular, who began his career in the 1980s as a member of Tony! Toni! Toné!, and is well-versed in the best traditions of the music, is a welcome relief from so much of the slick and empty R&B currently dominating the pop charts.

The music of PJ Harvey and Tom Waits provided some of the more biting social commentary this year. We discussed Waits' album in detail on the WSWS (See “Bad as Me—a new album from Tom Waits”.)

Harvey's album is an unsettling collection of bitter anti-war songs. It is difficult to think of another contemporary singer who has taken up the issue with such force, in whose music the brutality of war and the hatred of it among ordinary people find such expression.

In surveying the music released this year, one often recalls and is moved by individual songs rather than full-length albums. Perhaps the most significant song to appear this year was the single “Bradley Manning” by singer Cass McCombs. The song is an expression of solidarity with US Army private Bradley Manning, the military whistleblower accused of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks. Manning has been subjected to savage treatment during more than a year and a half of solitary confinement. “Bradley, know you have friends, though you're locked in there,” sings McCombs.

Other songs worth mentioning, some of them highlights from the albums mentioned above, include:

- “Helplessness Blues” - Fleet Foxes
- “America!” - Bill Callahan
- “Watching You Go Crazy (Is Driving Me Insane)” - Van Hunt
- “Rolled Together” - The Antlers
- “Doorstep” - Tune-Yards
- “Midnight City” - M83
- “The Glorious Land” - PJ Harvey
- “Day Dreams” - Raphael Saadiq
- “Civilian” - Wye Oak

- “It's Real” - Real Estate
- “Bay of Pigs” - Destroyer
- “Replica” - Oneohtrix Point Never
- “County Line” - Cass McCombs



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