

Favorite music of 2012

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If one were to judge solely based on the output of the Billboard Top 20 artists of the year, the top 10 iTunes downloads or the most widely attended concert tours of the year, one would get very little sense of what 2012 and recent years actually felt like to live in and through. And so-called “independent” or “underground” music offers little alternative.

Musicians display a good deal of talent in every genre, and yet so little of what emerges in popular music at present is successful in exploring human feeling or social life in truly moving and insightful ways. Many musicians, overwhelmed and unprepared to deal with such complex questions, have turned away, or turned inward. There is more than a little self-involvement in both commercial and independent music. In many cases, a one-sided emphasis on technique and formal experimentation attempts to fill in the gaps.

A glorification of wealth and backwardness persists in much of commercial hip hop. Identity politics makes itself felt in the lyrics of many of the more underground performers.

In jazz, the over-abundance of obscure, “avant-garde” music continues to be an issue. Technically adept, powerhouse soloists are also not in short supply, but there are too few who play with the lyricism and the narrative quality of the most compelling jazz.

As social struggle continues to grow, it will help to sweep away the more trivial things and push the best artists forward to ask new questions and explore different and more meaningful sounds and musical possibilities. But those questions will have to be asked. The difficult artistic and intellectual effort will have to be made. The present state of things will not do.

2012 was not, however, a wasteland and there were serious efforts to be found. Any list of “best” or “favorite” music of the year, of course, is limited. There are thousands of recordings released each year

and restricted access and time constraints are a factor. We were not able to hear everything we would have liked. Our choices are also skewed toward North American releases, those works most available to us. Matters of personal taste also come into play.

Having said that, we felt these were among the more serious and intelligent works in pop music and jazz this year.

Matthew Brennan

Channel Orange by Frank Ocean was perhaps the most complete album, in terms of strong musical ambition and lyrical content. Almost every song is guided by his unusually warm, dynamic voice and an appreciation for restraint and detail in describing social life. While the overall arch of the album is not entirely clear, collectively the songs attempt to portray complex social experiences, contain emotional honesty and often demonstrate deceptively strong storytelling. It is one of the few albums where one can both appreciate the beauty of a song, and also have some understanding of social and emotional life in 2012.

Neil Young’s *Psychedelic Pill*, though not the most musically inventive of rock albums, also stands out. Though still too much in favor of overly-long jam sessions, the veteran Young’s album combines sincerity, evidence of a desire to grapple with the artist’s own relationship to historical events and a vibrant musicianship and song-craft.

Individual songs are also worth noting. Within hip-hop in particular, several artists did attempt to grapple with political and economic developments directly, including Lupe Fiasco, Brother Ali, Homeboy Sandman, The Coup, Killer Mike and El-P. For a

variety of reasons, their overall efforts were mostly contradictory and confused. Nonetheless, it was notable that, in a few interesting songs, several popular hip hop and R&B artists condemned Barack Obama this year, and attempted to grapple with political events artistically.

Favorite Albums (in no particular order)

Channel Orange —Frank Ocean
Swing Lo Magellan— Dirty Projectors
Psychedelic Pill —Neil Young and Crazy Horse
The Cherry Thing— Neneh Cherry and the Thing
Lonerism— Tame Impala
'Allelujah! Don't Bend! Ascend! —Godspeed You!
Black Emperor
R.I.P. —Actress

Noteworthy songs

“Crack Rock,” Frank Ocean
“Just From Chevron,” Dirty Projectors
“Swing Lo Magellan,” Dirty Projectors
“Wasted Days,” Cloud Nothings
“Ramada Inn,” Neil Young & Crazy Horse
“Reagan,” Killer Mike
“Guillotine,” The Coup
“Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” Kendrick Lamar
“Please Forgive My Heart,” Bobby Womack
“Take A Walk,” Passion Pit
“Adorn,” Miguel
“Nothin’ But Time,” Cat Power (with Iggy Pop)

Hiram Lee

Favorite pop music

Life is People —Bill Fay
Temple Beautiful— Chuck Prophet
Break It Yourself —Andrew Bird
Channel Orange— Frank Ocean
A Thing Called Divine Fits— Divine Fits
The Odds—The Evens

Favorite jazz

Flip The Script— Orrin Evans
Consequences— David Kikoski
Wisteria— Steve Kuhn

Suite of the East —Omer Avital
Soul— Jeremy Pelt
Don't Look Back— Mary Stallings
Unanimous— Ulysses Owens Jr.
The Baddest Monk —Eric Reed
A Voice Through the Door— Conrad Herwig
Enfants Terribles: Live at the Blue Note— Lee Konitz/Bill Frisell/Gary Peacock/Joey Baron
Within a Song— John Abercrombie Quartet
Woody's Delight— Steve Turre

And two works which could go in either category:

Not Getting Behind is the New Getting Ahead— Charlie Hunter/Scott Amendola
Be Good— Gregory Porter



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