# The year in music: Favorite recordings of 2014

**Our reporters**
**31 December 2014**

It was not a great year in general for music.

The crass products turned out with such unrelenting frequency in commercial pop, rock and hip hop were as crass as ever. So-called "independent" music didn't fare much better.

Individual talent and technical achievement are not in short supply. Sorely lacking, however, are those moments that seize the listener with their urgency and the necessity of their musical invention—work that leaves audiences feeling more alert and alive. There remains too little that is genuine—truly angry, truly witty or sad (without resorting to self-pity). There is too little that "rocks" or "swings."

The works listed below, regrettably limited to English-language and North American releases for the most part, show signs of life. There are missteps and inconsistencies, but the strongest moments tend to rise above them and stay with the listener.

That the most musically interesting and convincing works at present tend *not* to be those that are the most explicitly political, speaks to some of the difficulties facing artists in confronting the more complex social, historical and artistic questions of our day.

A more forcible entry of the working class onto the world stage will help to sweep away much that feels stagnant and contrived. The best artists will work through the implications. Something different and better will make its way into the music. The best work lies ahead.

These were among our favorite recordings for 2014:

**Hiram Lee**

**Pop**

*Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* —Lucinda Williams
*Nikki Nack* —Tune-Yards
*Night Surfer* —Chuck Prophet
*Terms of My Surrender* —John Hiatt
*Going Down to the River* —Doug Seegers
*They Want My Soul* —Spoon
*Black Messiah* —D'Angelo and the Vanguard
*Metamodern Sounds in Country Music* —Sturgill Simpson
*The Lights from the Chemical Plant* —Robert Ellis
*Things are Really Great Here, Sort of…* —Andrew Bird

**Jazz**

*Amalgamations* —Ali Jackson
*Gathering Light* —Oran Etkin
*Tiddy Boom* —Michael Blake
*The Art of Conversation* —Kenny Barron & Dave Holland
*New Song* —Omer Avital
*Flash Forward* —Michael Carvin Experience
*Groovewise* —Eric Reed
*Urban Folklore* —Thomas Marriott
*Bloom* —JD Allen
*Liberation Blues* —Orrin Evans
*Quiet Pride: The Elizabeth Catlett Project* —Rufus Reid
*Chicago Fire* —Eric Alexander
*Peace* —Dayna Stephens
*Blues and Reds*—Hush Point

**Matthew Brennan**

*Lost in the Dream* by The War On Drugs holds up relatively well as a heartfelt attempt to capture and express moods of weariness and the need for emotional resurgence. The pastoral musical arrangements, particularly expressed in the guitar and piano playing, demonstrate an uncommon patience to let songs develop in vibrant and contemplative ways over the course of ten songs. It continues to be fairly rewarding on repeated listens.

Much more was coherently and confidently expressed in jazz and instrumental albums this year. The jazz trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, for instance, continued to develop movingly his distinct approach to somber and texturally rich expressions of love and anger and indignation on *The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier To Paint*. The electronic group Naked Geometry released an album, *The Missing 43*, which attempted to give musical expression to the anger and apprehension that emerged in the aftermath of the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Normal School students in Mexico.

One album that I found particularly relevant, if not entirely rewarding, was *Lament*, by the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten [Collapsing New Buildings]. Commissioned by the Belgian town of Diksmuide to mark the centenary of the start of the First World War, the band chose to convey the event in ominous and foreboding terms, underscoring the horrors of war and all the barbarism that was to follow 1914. To the band's credit, this approach to the 100th anniversary was in stark contrast to the nationalist triumphalism being pushed on the population by most governments around the world this year.

**Albums**

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*Lost in The Dream* —The War On Drugs
*Sunbathing Animal*— Parquet Courts
*Lament* —Einstürzende Neubauten
*The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier To Paint* —Ambrose Akinmusire
*New Song* —Omer Avital
*L'Amour* —Lewis (re-issue)
*The Missing 43* —Naked Geometry
*Béla Fleck and Abigail Washburn*—Béla Fleck and Abigail Washburn

As for interesting individual songs, there was a bit more to highlight than at the album level, though still not nearly enough. There were artists that, in shorter form, created moving or musically inventive songs about genuine love, loss, pain, and joy that I did not tire of throughout the year. Of particular note was Kelsey Waldon's "High In Heels," a song that demonstrated a sensitivity in music for the difficulties of life in our present epoch that was all too uncommon this year.

**Individual songs**

"High In Heels"—Kelsey Waldon
"People Don't Get What They Deserve"—Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings
"Just Can't Win"—Lee Fields and the Expressions
"DBF"—Brian Eno and Karl Hyde
"He Died Fighting"—Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band
"Standing in the Breach"—Jackson Browne
"Can't Do Without You"—Caribou
"I'm So Glad, I Done Got Over"—Leadbelly (previously unreleased)
"Under The Pressure"—The War On Drugs
"Eyes To the Wind"—The War On Drugs
"Ave Cesaria"—Stromae
"Faith in Strangers"—Andy Stott
"Rainbow"—Robert Plant
"Wait For a Minute"—Tune-Yards
"As We Fight"—Ambrose Akinmusire
"Black and White"—Parquet Courts
"Do You"—Spoon
"Sag Mir Wo Die Blumen Sind"—Einstürzende Neubauten
"Come & See"—Protomartyr
"Soul of a Woman"—BJ The Chicago Kid
"The Wall"—Willie Nelson
"Send Me a Picture"—Willie Nelson
"Chemical Plant"—Robert Ellis
"Charade"—D'Angelo and the Vanguard
"Nada Em Vão"—Rodrigo Amarante
"Explode"—Big Freedia
"Mahogany Dread"—Hiss Golden Messenger
"A Dream of You and Me"—Future Islands
"My Sister's Tiny Hands"—Andrew Bird
"I Thought the World of You"—Lewis

**Nick Barrickman**

There were a number of works that allowed for a glimpse, if only a fleeting one, of some of the problems occurring more broadly in social life. Below are the more notable works, in my view, of the past year.

**Albums**

*… And Then You Shoot Your Cousin* —The Roots

An intentionally dark offering from the veteran hip hop band. The relatively dreary sounding instrumentals and lyrics, provided by vocalist Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter and drummer/producer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, suggest the state of decay that has beset the modern hip hop world and society more broadly. Though well-intentioned, The Roots often focus too narrowly on opposing "gangsta rap" stereotypes that pervade mainstream culture, without delving into the more complex social questions lurking behind them.

Best songs: "Never," "Black Rock" and "Tomorrow." *2014 Forest Hills Drive* —J. Cole

One of the more interesting but uneven efforts of 2014, J. Cole's third studio album reveals an artist caught between two worlds. While often capable of thoughtful and interesting work, he sometimes lapses into more backward territory, promoting the self-seeking "hustler's" mentality so common in hip hop music.

Best songs: "Intro," "Apparently" and "Love Yourz." *Lese Majesty* —Shabazz Palaces

A dreamlike collection from the Seattle-based duo of Ishmael "Palaceer Lazaro" Butler (formerly of Digable Planets) and Tendai "Baba" Maraire, *Lese Majesty* is a more stripped-down and simpler work than the others on the list. Many of the lyrics consist of repeated phrases that waft through (and underneath) the mixture of synthesized and live instruments. The melodies often have a "weightless" feeling. Despite the unorthodox format, the songs show ample amounts of sensitivity, intelligence and an infectiously uninhibited approach to music.

Best songs: "They Come in Gold," "Solemn Swears" and "Motion Sickness"

**Individual songs**

"Heavenly Father"—Isaiah Rashad
"Sordid Affair"—Röyksopp
"Crown"—Run the Jewels
"Early"—Run the Jewels
"Not Listening"—J-Live
"Vonnegut Busy"—Sage Francis

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