

Musical highlights of 2018

Matthew Brennan, Hiram Lee
31 December 2018

Ignoring for a moment the more obscene tribute to wealth found in the music of chart toppers like Beyoncé, Jay-Z or Cardi B in 2018, the character of far too many of this year's releases could be summed up in a word—boring.

Much of the past year's rock music sounded like it was recorded between naps. The music is groggy and lethargic. There is not much even of the adolescent nose-thumbing one might expect to find.

In jazz too, an irritating sameness persists. Switch one recording for another and there is little difference. But while so much of the year's music felt foggy and detached from real life, there were noteworthy exceptions.

Hiram Lee

Jazz

Few jazz musicians working today are as consistently enjoyable as Israeli-born bassist-composer Omer Avital. His latest album *Qantar* is another strong entry in an already impressive body of work. Like his earlier efforts, *Qantar* combines jazz with Middle Eastern and African musical traditions. One is struck by how easy and uncontrived this sounds in Avital's hands.

This music is especially refreshing, coming as it does at a time when artists are told by cultural segregationists to "stay in their lanes." Avital evidently sees no borders or claims in music, and he is not the only one. Many of the year's best musicians refused to limit themselves to one "lane," "border," genre or supposedly separate "culture."

We discussed the memorable fusion of jazz and country music on *Vanished Gardens*, the latest album from Charles Lloyd and the Marvels, in an earlier review. With *Modern Lore*, the supremely talented guitarist Julian Lage brought together elements of jazz, country music and early rock n roll. Lage was a child prodigy, whose early life as a musician was captured in the Oscar-nominated film *Jules at Eight*. It would be hard to find another guitarist as technically proficient as he is, but he never sacrifices musicality to mechanics. He is a daring and playful improviser.

Other noteworthy jazz albums released this year included:

Still Dreaming – Joshua Redman
Concentric Circles – Kenny Barron Quintet
Combo 66 – John Scofield
Papa Wawa – Asaf Yuria
At the Edge of the World – Aaron Goldberg
Love Stone – JD Allen
To and From the Heart – Steve Kuhn Trio
Remember Love – Houston Person & Ron Carter
Noir en Rouge (Live in Paris) – Jeremy Pelt
Dreams and Connections – Baptiste Herbin
Blues for Maggie – Zhenya Strigalev
Pop, Rock and Country

The self-titled debut of Washington, DC band the Messthetics

throws off the lethargy of this year's rock music to contribute an exciting instrumental record. The trio consists of bassist Joe Lally and drummer Brendan Canty, the former rhythm section of Fugazi, and guitarist Anthony Pirog, whose ferocity on guitar is balanced with intelligence and taste. As one chord butts its head against another and Lally and Canty play as though they were trying to force their way through a crowd, the listener will find his or her heart beginning to race. Nothing about their music feels complacent.

The new album *Understanding* by indie pop singer-songwriter Mirah is something of an antidote to the gloominess permeating so much "indie" music. Her songs are humane, compassionate and oppositional (as far as they go). Mirah's lyrics contain more poetry than most, and the relatively stripped-down instrumentation at times manages to feel orchestral. There is a sweetness in both her voice and music which never becomes cute or precious.

The year's best country music is probably found on Brent Cobb's *Providence Canyon* and John Prine's *The Tree of Forgiveness*. The Georgia-born Cobb's lyrics demonstrate his intimate knowledge of life in the small-town working-class southern US. His songs are polished but never slick. The veteran Prine has the uncommon ability to combine humor with tenderness in a single lyric. His voice is worn, and the lyrics are as much spoken as they are sung, but the listener hangs on to every word.

Other memorable recordings included:

Rough and Ready Heart – Blue Yonder
Back Roads and Abandoned Motels – The Jayhawks
Uniform Distortion/Uniform Clarity – Jim James
One Drop of Truth – The Wood Brothers
Healing Tide – The War and Treaty
The Prodigal Son – Ry Cooder
The Eclipse Sessions – John Hiatt
These Days – Paul Carrack
 "Bloodless" – Andrew Bird
 "Hallucination (Live)" – Sam Lee

Matthew Brennan

Best albums:

Standing out this year were musical efforts that expressed, consciously or unconsciously, a certain international or cultural interconnectedness, from artists who did not limit themselves to familiar musical tropes, moods or structures. The artists included in this list exhibit a good deal of musical skill and creativity as well.

Con Todo El Mundo – Khruangbin
Knock Knock – DJ Koze
Concerto Zapico, Volume 2 – Forma Antiqua

There were particular album highlights: Khruangbin's *Con Todo El Mundo*, by a rock/R&B trio from Houston, had an interesting approach to blending musical styles from multiple continents in an

exciting and confident approach from start to finish. Berlin DJ Koze's (Stefan Kozalla) album *Knock Knock*, was an inventive effort that drew upon different elements of electronic, dance and soul music, adding a wide-ranging variety of different vocalists throughout, while keeping movement and frenzy at the center of it all. There was also Antiqua Forma's *Concerto Zapico Volume 2*, from a classically-trained ensemble out of Spain led by brothers Aarón, Daniel and Pablo Zapico, who performed mostly 17th century Spanish baroque music with intriguing skill and a clear joy for the material involved.

Change In The Air – Cuong Vu 4tet

The Balance – Moses Boyd

Love Stone – JD Allen

Universal Beings - Makaya McCraven

Orquesta Akokan – Orquesta Akokan

We Out Here – Brownswood Recordings (Compilation)

In jazz, there were interesting album efforts by artists in the US and UK in particular. Trumpeter Cuong Vu produced a notable album entitled *Change In The Air*. The camaraderie and respect of the four players (Vu, the excellent guitarist Bill Frissell, drummer Ted Poor and bassist Luke Bergman) is felt on nearly all the expressive, blues-leaning compositions. Saxophonist JD Allen's *Love Stone* is also a good example of confident, soulful and attentive improvisation by an impressive group of musicians.

Two jazz drummers, Moses Boyd from London and Makaya McCraven from Chicago, released impressive albums heavily influenced by hip hop and percussive exploration, in *The Balance* and *Universal Beings* respectively. Both albums alternate frequently and effectively between sonically vibrant and deliberately contemplative expressions with a good deal of success.

Boyd was also included on a very good compilation album of young London-based jazz artists on Brownswood Recordings' *We Out Here*. Nearly every artist is intriguing in one form or another. The energetic and unusual mambo album *Orquesta Akokan*, by a band of the same name, is a collaboration between American and Cuban jazz musicians, and was also a highlight this year for its vibrancy and creativity.

Oceanic – Niklas Plaschburg

All Melody – Nils Frahm

The Blue Notebooks (15th anniversary reissue) – Max Richter

In classical music, albeit loosely connected to the genre, there were somewhat unique and thoughtful efforts by the German composers Niklas Plaschburg and Nils Frahm, in *Oceanic* and *All Melody* respectively. There was also a 15th anniversary re-issue of British composer Max Richter's *The Blue Notebooks*, written in opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which is well worth re-visiting. These are more subdued recordings, but they capture something subtly beautiful and unique.

Third – Nathan Salsburg

Golden Hour – Kacey Musgraves

Electric Sunset – Twanguero

No Mercy In This Land – Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite

And in the rock, blues and country genres, a couple of albums are also notable. I was particularly impressed by the skillful and autumnal "finger-picking" album *Third* by Louisville-based guitarist Nathan Salsburg. On the opposite end of the instrument's spectrum, the rollicking *Electric Sunset* by the talented Spanish electric-blues guitarist Twanguero was also something of a breath of fresh air. The pairing of Charlie Musselwhite and Ben Harper in *No Mercy In This Land* was also effective in its driving and gritty blues compositions, of which Musselwhite's harmonica playing is a particular highlight. And

with certain reservations, the album *Golden Hour* by country artist Kacey Musgraves was sincere, confident and at times refreshingly risky in its willingness to step outside of the very tired musical confines of the weak "pop" country genre.

Best songs:

Certain songs stood out too. I felt the most moving protest song of the year was folk singer Alela Diane's "Émigré," which imagines her as a mother on a doomed immigrant life raft crossing the Mediterranean with her children. The haunting second refrain remains well after the song is done: "Sea birds fly the salty winds/East to south, north to west/Can we go as they go/Across the border lines?"

Other songs, such as the pro-immigrant "Danny Nedelko", the empathetic "May Your Kindness Remain" and several intriguing electronic-dance songs stood out too.

"Émigré" – Alela Diane

"Canarios" – Forma Antiqua

"Danny Nedelko" – IDLES

"Bloodless" – Andrew Bird

"May Your Kindness Remain" – Courtney Marie Andrews

"It Makes You Forget (Itgehane)" – Peggy Gou

"Oom Sha La La" – Haley Henderickx

"No Land" – Buke & Gase

"Natural Skin Deep" – Neneh Cherry

"Once" – Nubya Garcia

"High Horse" – Kacey Musgraves

Best music videos:

The WSWs already commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the intriguing video "This Is America" by Childish Gambino (Donald Glover). In addition, I felt the video "Pa'lante" by the Puerto Rican rock band Hurray for the Riff Raff, directed by Kristian Mercado Figueroa, was perhaps the most moving video of this genre. Keeping the ravages of Hurricane Maria and the lingering past of colonialism at the forefront while dealing with a damaged relationship, it was unusual in its ability to tie personal difficulties to much larger questions.

"Pa'lante" – Hurray for the Riff Raff, directed by Kristian Mercado Figueroa

"This is America" – Childish Gambino, directed by Hiro Murai



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