

Favorite music of 2020

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The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the music industry in 2020. With live performances cancelled and music venues forced to shut down, vast numbers of performers were thrown out of work. The livelihoods of musicians and technical support crews, most of whom work far outside the spotlight of music stardom, were devastated.

Adding to the horror, many veteran performers died, among them jazz musicians Lee Konitz, Ellis Marsalis, Bucky Pizzarelli, Mike Longo and Wallace Roney, and country singers John Prine and Charley Pride. These were needless deaths caused by policies aimed at guaranteeing the continued enrichment of the wealthiest layers of society, whatever the consequences for workers, and artists.

Despite this unprecedented loss and hardship, musicians continued making music, and they found new ways to connect with audiences. Many livestreamed intimate and informal performances from their own homes. The performances given by classical pianist Igor Levit on Twitter were especially noteworthy.

While a few artists contributed songs in support of the global protests over the police murder of George Floyd, only a little of the concrete social world ultimately found its way into music in 2020. Art trails behind events in the best of circumstances, and even some of the best artists working today were no doubt unprepared to grapple with a crisis so immense. But the experiences of 2020 cannot help but find eventual reflection in the work of the most sensitive musicians.

When it does, it will find little support from the well-established cultural critics busy promoting some of the worst trends in art. Music is increasingly judged according to its usefulness as cultural or personal identity symbolism. As long as a given piece of music can be sold as “empowering” for one or another identity, the actual content or quality of the music

matters very little. The most egregious example of this in 2020 was the praise offered by critics to the sexually gratuitous, even pornographic, song “WAP” by rappers Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

The recordings selected below were not nearly so celebrated this year, but they were among the best of 2020.

Hiram Lee

Of the albums listed below, the most frequently returned to were *Reflections of the Eternal Line*, featuring duet recordings by American saxophonist Greg Osby and Swiss drummer Florian Arbenz; Sam Lee’s *Old Wow*, in which Lee performs folk songs in some cases centuries old with often stunning immediacy; and Rufus Wainwright’s *Unfollow the Rules*, featuring what was probably the most beautifully composed and performed pop music of the year.

Jazz

Reflections of the Eternal Line—Greg Osby and Florian Arbenz

Toys/Die Dreaming—JD Allen

Jazz Dance Suites—Charles McPherson

Swallow Tales—John Scofield, Bill Stewart, Steve Swallow

New York Paradox—Omer Avital: Qantar

America at War—Joel Harrison +18

There is a Tide—Chris Potter

Pop & Folk Music

Old Wow—Sam Lee

Unfollow the Rules—Rufus Wainwright

They’ll Never Keep Us Down—Kelsey Waldon

Rawer than Raw—Bobby Rush

Kingdom in My Mind—The Wood Brothers

Matthew Brennan

These are the albums and individual songs that seemed most interesting in popular music this year. Every album has its strengths and rewards, but none is without certain weaknesses either. Yet most have the character—literally or figuratively—of looking outward to the world and to history for inspiration. The results are often an opening up of the music to exciting sounds and feelings. Even if not fully realized, many albums feel as though they are attempting to find a common language and experience among musical styles, influences, moods and feelings.

Identity politics—the preferred method of dividing workers and youth by the Democratic Party in the US—still has a pernicious hold upon far too much and far too many in popular music. The songs that most convincingly grappled with some aspect of the current social and economic situation—and this type of effort was in desperately short supply this year—avoided walling off the suffering of workers and young people according to their race, gender or nationality.

The stronger artists sought to move in more universal and concrete directions, instead taking aim at the criminals on Wall Street or in the Pentagon. Steve Earle’s album on the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster was a highlight in this regard. A few individual songs listed below made noteworthy attempts as well. Some jazz and electronic musicians also continue to impress with thoughtful, invigorating compositions.

Rock and Folk Albums

Ghosts of West Virginia—Steve Earle and the Dukes

En Espanol—The Mavericks

The Dancing Devils of Djibouti—Groupe RTD

Shore—Fleet Foxes

Mordechai—Khruangbin

Bonny Light Horseman—Bonny Light Horseman

Jazz Albums

Connect—Charles Tolliver

New Horizons: Young Stars of South African

Jazz—Various Artists

Palo Alto—Thelonious Monk (previously unreleased)

Additional Albums

A few albums offered interesting archival sketches of music in one manner or another. One late discovery, for instance, was the engaging career retrospective released by the Analogue Africa record label of Peruvian *cumbia* musician Raúl “Ranil” Llerena Vásquez. Interweaving a variety of different Amazonian musical sounds and styles, mainly created four or five decades ago, Vazquez’s music often feels as vibrant as anything produced in pop music this year.

Ranil y su Conjunto Tropical—Raúl Llerena Vásquez

Sketches of China—Xuefei Yang

Azerbaijani Gitara—Rustem Quliyev

Heart’s Ease—Shirley Collins

Notable Individual Pop Songs

“Time (You and I)”—Khruangbin

“La Sitiera”—The Mavericks

“4 American Dollars”—U.S. Girls

“Clean Kill”—Coriky

“It’s About Blood”—Steve Earle and The Dukes

“Michigan Hammers”; “Modern Business Hymns”—Protomartyr

“Five More Minutes”—The War and Treaty

“Etran”—Disclosure

Notable livestream performances and concerts:

Beethoven Piano Sonatas (Cycles 1–7)—Igor Levit

Paradise (John Prine Tribute Performance)—Various Artists



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