

# Favorite jazz and pop music of 2021

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30 December 2021

The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate every aspect of social and cultural life. Artists and technical workers in the music industry face conditions unlike anything seen in generations, if ever. The vast majority of those trying to make a living in music are thrown to the financial wolves at every turn.

Most working musicians, singers and ancillary music workers lived dangerously close to economic ruin even before the pandemic. This vulnerability has been aggravated dramatically by the pandemic. With little ability to make a living off record sales or streaming revenues, most musicians and workers depend on live concerts, touring and self-promotion to get by.

In the US, every wing of the political establishment has joined hands to preside over a reopening of businesses and schools amid two deadly COVID-19 surges in late 2021. Having been given virtually no financial support in 2020, musicians have now been forced to confront a terrible choice in 2021: stay home and risk economic ruin or go play to crowds and risk potentially deadly infections.

Not surprisingly, music news headlines are dominated by artists and fans contracting the coronavirus at large and small concerts, planned tours being shut down and concerts being canceled for fear of outbreaks. The number of musicians and concertgoers who have become seriously ill or died from this recklessness is yet to be accurately determined—and is an ongoing process.

The rush to reopen concert venues and touring in pursuit of profit at all costs found its most terrible embodiment this year in the tragic Astroworld concert stampede, which killed at least nine people, including children.

Art trails behind events even under the best of conditions. This tendency is particularly pronounced when surveying popular music in 2021. The blows of the pandemic have thus far resulted in music often looking everywhere but directly at the crisis it confronts.

Much of the critical favorites have produced music that sounds and sings as if the pandemic never existed. A return to familiar and often tired themes and imagery persists. A bleak, self-involved concern with fatigue, hopelessness and despair—pronounced even before March 2020—co-exists with vacuous money worship and an irritating sameness in the sounds, despite world-changing events and dangers.

The noxious narrowing of art through racialist concepts and symbolism continues to influence far too many talented artists as well. In jazz for instance, there is a visible trend to revive the dead-end of 1960s-era black nationalism in the US and UK. Artists who create music based on racial or gender “empowerment”—no matter how crass or backward—are generally and uncritically praised by the music press.

Fortunately, there is growing anger, empathy and restlessness also evident among musicians and singers, spurred on by events and moods of the past year as well. The artists in the lists below were those who we felt strongest about in this regard.

Matthew Brennan

*Best Jazz Albums* Tenor saxophonist Charles Lloyd, 83 years old and about to enter the sixth decade of his career, continues to make genuinely moving collaborative music. On *Tone Poem*, his lyrical playing style pairs remarkably well with the inventive and soulful guitarists Bill Frisell (electric guitar) and Greg Leisz (pedal steel), as well as drummer Eric Harland and bassist Reuben Rogers. Eschewing academic and sullen trends too common in the genre these days, the quintet blends melodic free jazz with elements of country music and rhythm and blues. The curiosity to explore melodies and grooves across genres—in both covers and original songs—is grounded by a high level of skill and patience.

The collection of improvised duets between jazz pianist Jason Moran and singer-saxophonist-playwright Archie Shepp on *Let My People Go* is also at times remarkable. Moran is one of the most intelligent and skillful piano players in jazz today. His emotionally sophisticated and empathetic playing allows for the duo to explore a range of tense moods and textures built around songbook standards and unique musical phrasings by Shepp (also 83).

Virtuoso guitarist Julian Lage continues to produce vibrant and blues-centered jazz on his new album *Squint*. Lage’s tightly interconnected trio, with bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Dave King, creates angular improvisations and harmonic turnarounds that sustain a lively spirit throughout the album.

The debut album *Nafs at Peace* from the Pakistani quartet Jaubi was also a revelation. Nothing sounded quite like it. The group invigoratingly blends post-bop jazz with North Indian classical music, as well as elements of hip hop and electronic beat music. The result is a surprisingly energizing and danceable sound at times. The quartet’s name is Urdu for “whatever” and according to their website they use the term to imply that one should “create whatever sounds good and whatever feels good.” In a period where artists are incessantly scolded by identity-obsessed critics to “stay in their lane” and keep within the bounds of their “own culture,” the sentiments and music of Jaubi are a breath of fresh air.

*Tone Poem*—Charles Lloyd and the Marvels (US)  
*Spring*—Ibrahim Khalil Shihab Quintet (South Africa—Reissue)  
*Squint*—Julian Lage (US)  
*Let My People Go*—Archie Shepp and Jason Moran (US)  
*Nafs at Peace*—Jaubi (Pakistan)  
*Human*—Shai Maestro (Israel)  
*I Told You So*—Delvon Lamarr Organ Trio (US)  
*Umdali*—Malcolm Jiyane (South Africa)

## Best Popular Music Albums

One of the few bands to address the criminality of the pandemic head-on is a trio called Lula Wiles, on the album *Shame and Sedition*. Girded by the group’s effective harmonizing, most songs express anger and outrage at the social catastrophe pursued by the rich over the past 22 months. Numbers like “Do You Really Want the World to End?” carry an appropriately urgent tone. Lyrics from the song “Oh My God” cut sharply, aimed directly at the rich who are presently “Stepping over bodies, grinning like a movie star.” And later:

“What have you been doing since the world shut down?  
Counting all the cards you stole to build your house

*Your insidious extraction won't protect you now  
'Cause we're turning on the lights that you've been shooting out.'*

Of any full-length pop music album this year, multi-instrumentalist/hip-hop producer Madlib's (Otis Jackson) *Sound Ancestors* was perhaps most rewarding musically. Buoyed by a small galaxy of global music samples and a rhythm-forward framework, Jackson creates a soulful sonic universe unlike anything else in the genre. Aided by British electronic artist Kieran "Four Tet" Hebden's arrangements, Jackson allows his songs to really breathe and develop, with great success.

Sierra Ferrell's debut *Long Time Coming* impressively showcases a variety of compelling musical approaches—blues, calypso, New Orleans jazz, bluegrass, folk, country and others—with her confident singing the element that ties all the seemingly distinct strands together.

*Shame and Sediton*—Lula Wiles (US)

*Sound Ancestors*—Madlib (US)

*Yaral Sa Doom [Educate the Children]*—Wau Wau Collectif (Senegal)

*Urban Driftwood*—Yasmin Williams (US)

*Long Time Coming*—Sierra Farrell (US)

*Afrique Victime*—Mdou Moctar (Mali)

*Korolen*—Toumani Diabete and London Symphony Orchestra (UK/Mali)

*Fair and Square*—John Prine (US—Deluxe Reissue)

### Best Individual Songs

Understandably, there was no shortage of songs about loneliness, depression and so on this year. Few artists were able to fight through the pessimism. Lula Wiles, as noted above, was one of the exceptions. British singer Arlo Parks also notably produced lively songs this year that were deeply empathetic to those suffering, while keeping an optimistic eye open.

Belgian pop star Stromae produced an intriguing song and music video exalting service workers, as did Indian artists Dhee and Arivu with Sri Lankan plantation workers.

Other songs on here are noted for their high level of technical skill, their unusual warmth, sincerity, or their interesting musical creativity.

"Oh My God"—Lula Wiles

"Spring"—Ibrahim Khalil Shihab Quintet (South Africa)

"Sante"—Stromae (Belgium)

"Road of the Lonely Ones"; "The New Normal"—Madlib (US)

"Mouhamadou Lo and His Children"—Wau Wau Collectif (Senegal)

"Hurt"; "Hope"—Arlo Parks (UK)

"Nunca Vas a Comprender" [You Will Never Understand]—Rita Payes (Spain)

"Rich or Poor"—Gloria Ann Taylor (US)

"The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming"; "Imperial Twist"—No-No Boy (US)

"Birthday/The Pain"—For Those I Love (Ireland)

"Oblivion" (Astor Piazzolla Cover)—Rodrigo y Gabriela, with Vincente Amigo (Mexico)

"Deja"—Bomba Estereo (Colombia)

"Midnight Run"—Charley Crockett (James Hand cover) (US)

"Enjoy Enjaami"—Dhee and Arivu (India)

### Erik Schreiber

When *Smoke Rises*, the debut by singer-poet Mustafa, was among the albums that caught my attention in 2021. With modesty and calm assurance (a combination that is a coup in itself), Mustafa sings gently about gang violence, grief and the desire for revenge that they generate. Despite its focus on loss, the album is not weighed down by pessimism. Instead, what motivates it is a genuinely humane attempt to understand

and overcome the tribulations that many poor and working-class people, especially youth, face. The quiet arrangements and soft percussion combine with Mustafa's genuine compassion to provide a balm for the bereaved. Without indulging in illusions, Mustafa expresses a confident hope in the future.

Another notable album was *I Have Nothing to Say to the Mayor of L.A.*, in which Dean Wareham (formerly of indie bands Luna and Galaxie 500) addresses politics in an uncharacteristically sustained and explicit way. Wareham sings about Eleanor Marx and the Hollywood blacklist and closes the album by asking, "Why are we in the South China Sea?" His moments of humor, while not bad in themselves, sometimes give the impression that he is pulling his punches. The music continues the reverberated, hypnagogic style for which Wareham's former bands are known. In two covers of songs from the 1960s, which are highlights of the album, Wareham wears his musical influences on his sleeve.

The New York rock band Parquet Courts released *Sympathy for Life* in 2021. Always open to experimentation, the band here ventures into funk and electronic dance territory, often evoking the early 1980s. Each of the arrangements is distinctive and offers several layers of rhythmic pull and timbral interest. The most successful and galvanizing song is the opening "Walking at a Downtown Pace." Although the band acquits itself well on the dance-oriented songs, other tracks show that the band is most comfortable in the rock idiom. Lyrics that mention rideshare drivers and other aspects of daily life are encouraging, but one or two songs are unnecessarily cryptic.

A standout single from 2021 is Snail Mail's "Valentine," which conveys the anguish of romantic rejection in all its urgency. Singer-songwriter-guitarist Lindsey Jordan's dynamic shifts jolt the listener, as was no doubt intended (also providing an effective musical equivalent of a forsaken lover's swings between grief and rage). Jordan also plays chords not often heard in rock, enriching the song's texture. Her vocal performance, which alternates between tender confession and fiery reproach, unites emotional sincerity and conscious technique. The song demonstrates distinct talent.

### Tom Carter

The acoustic guitar duo Rodrigo y Gabriela continue to make appealing and energetic music, with a studio performance of Astor Piazzolla's masterpiece "Oblivion" featuring Spanish flamenco guitarist Vicente Amigo a highlight of their activity this year.

Their music of previous years is worth revisiting (or discovering for the first time). Sincere and humble as performers, their characteristic blend of heavy metal and flamenco is accessible, skillful and versatile. And at its best, in the opinion of this writer, their music ("Megalopolis," "Master Maqui," "Diablo Rojo") builds advanced, dynamic, sympathetic rhythms and phrases out of the clean sounds of a familiar instrument, which have resonated with audiences far from the duo's origins in Mexico City, Mexico. Last year, Rodrigo y Gabriela emerged from relative obscurity to win a well-deserved Grammy Award for their album *Mettavolution*.



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