

# Popular music and jazz in 2022, a selection

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The global social crises and upheavals of the past several years continue to have a contradictory impact on the artistic output of talented musicians and singers. On the one hand, there is no shortage of highly skilled and empathetic singers and musicians. Several albums and songs in popular music this year make that abundantly clear.

There is also a visible increase in albums and songs that attempt to take up some aspect of the pandemic and attendant social crisis, which has now killed over 25 million people worldwide, and thrown billions of lives into chaos under the murderous “herd immunity” policy.

Many working musicians, for instance, must now tour and play live concerts most of the year in order to support themselves financially. They thus constantly face the potential long-term prospect of playing until they get terribly sick with a deadly virus, or face financial ruin, or both.

Many songs and albums remain bogged down by the artists’ very limited understanding of the historical and political context in which the present crises emerge. Strands of hopelessness, ennui, pessimism and crass individualism are too often the default instinct of many artists when it comes to grappling with the social processes they confront. Compounding this difficulty is the tendency as well of far too many to express their anger and other strong feelings primarily or solely in racial, gender or national terms. This prevents them—and this is why the ruling elite and its apologists propagate such conceptions—from locating the source of the force that will overcome these crises, the international working class.

Nor do many artists yet attempt to grapple with the historic character and danger of imperialist war, which now threatens the globe with a third world war and the nuclear annihilation of the planet in the NATO/US-provoked war with Russia in Ukraine. Thus far very few musicians or singers even have something insightful or serious to say about the grave threat of war. The anti-Russian hysteria grips a significant portion of the upper middle class.

A notable and important exception in this regard is veteran musician Roger Waters, formerly of Pink Floyd, and his powerful concert music tour, “This is Not a Drill.” As we noted in September:

“Such an event, so unusual and important, demands special consideration, above all because it raises to a high and pressing level, in the actual experience of large numbers of people, the issue of the relationship between art and politics in a period of unprecedented crisis.”

And we pointed out that such an event could only be conducted by a genuinely oppositional artist:

“Waters is a serious and, therefore, unflinchingly honest artist, bold in his conceptions about the world. His striking artistry and his opposition to the existing social system are interwoven, they nourish one another. This is not an artificial ‘leftism,’ grafted on a contrived and superficial ‘radicalism’ that is careful to avoid stepping over the

accepted limits. Waters absorbed ‘rebellion’ into his bone and marrow a very long time ago, and he continues to live and breathe it. He inspires the audience to think critically, to feel outrage against that which exists, and to believe that a new and better world can and must be brought into being.”

Though no musical artist reached the levels of Waters’ powerful tour this year, there are several notable and engaging contributions that deserve a broader audience. These are some selections below.

## Popular music albums

Belgian singer Stromae continues to develop in a genuinely interesting direction, both musically and lyrically. He draws on a wide range of world sounds and often convincingly integrates these into heartfelt songs about the lives of workers and the downtrodden, official hypocrisy, and the mentally ill, and conveys anger at the widespread suffering in society. He also manages to maintain a surging musical optimism in many of his best tracks, which can be quickly felt in any language.

Songwriter-guitarists Anna Tivel and S.G. Goodman also admirably keep their album compositions focused on the elements of society too often overlooked in popular music: the homeless, individuals and families wracked by drug addiction, the overworked, the lonely, and other numerous “outcasts” of different strands in society. Both albums are deeply empathetic, and at times appropriately angry at the conditions their song characters must endure.

The album produced by the Algerian Taureg group Imarhan (meaning “The ones I care about”), was the most musically interesting lyric album this writer encountered this year, drawing on a large catalog of African sounds and invoking sensitively crafted emotional moods. It felt fully realized from the first song to the last. And Roger Waters continues to provide a powerful illustration of the best forms of artistic opposition—in this case to an anti-war impulse based on serious historical and political insight. One hopes other artists will soon be following his lead.

*Multitude* – Stromae (Belgium)

*Outsiders* – Anna Tivel (US)

*Teeth Marks* – S. G. Goodman (US)

*Aboogi* - Imarhan (Algeria)

*The Lockdown Sessions* – Roger Waters (US/UK)

## Jazz albums

In jazz, several well-established artists continue to produce moving compositions that both build on their existing catalogs and manage to explore even more expressive and challenging musical directions. The albums composed or led by Avishai Cohen, Julian Lage, and Charles Lloyd (now 84 years old) were among the most moving jazz albums released this year. The extraordinary skill, sensitivity and spirit of rhythmic and tonal innovation was consistent across all of these albums. Composers Makaya McCraven and J.D. Allen also released challenging and rewarding albums that blended certain aspects of

traditional jazz with hip hop, blues, and folk music. There is an impressive level of group interplay, patience, rhythmic improvisation and energy on all of these selections.

*Shifting Sands* – Avishai Cohen Trio (Israel)

*View with a Room* – Julian Lage (US)

*Trios* album series (*Ocean/Chapel/Sacred Thread*) – Charles Lloyd (US)

*Americana, Vol 2* – J.D. Allen Trio (US)

*In These Times* – Makaya McCraven (US)

*Long Gone* – Joshua Redman/Brad Mehldau/Christian McBride/Brian Blade (US)

*The Next Door* – Julia Hülsmann Quartet (Germany)

### **Instrumental and electronic albums**

These were the most intriguing non-vocal albums that this reviewer encountered, generally characterized by a high level of artistic skill in instrumentation and production, innovative compositional quality, or an unusual level of liveliness and warmth. The deeply expressive guitar playing by Joseph Allred was the highlight of this group of talented musicians.

*The Rambles & Rags of Shiloh* – Joseph Allred (US)

*Botanica Dream* – Monster Rally (US)

*Over Fields and Mountains*[posthumous release] – Branko Mataja (former Yugoslavia/US)

*Origin of Forms* – The Disonics (Russia)

*Ali* - Vieux Farka Touré and Khruangbin (Mali/US)

*DJ-Kicks: Detroit Forward* – Theo Parrish [curator] (US)

*Icon* – Two Shell (UK)

### **Individual songs**

“Precious Cargo” – Hurray for the Riff Raff

“If I Were Someone You Loved”; “Work Until I Die” – S.G. Goodman

“Sante” – Stromae

“This is a Photograph” – Kevin Morby

“The Year We Fell Behind” – Craig Finn

“Derivative” – Third Coast Percussion and Jlin

“Fever Dream (We’ll Never Forget This Place)” – Monster Rally

“Anything” – Sharon Van Etten

The self-titled debut album by punk-oriented British band Wet Leg was a bright spot in 2022. The band first gained fame with the wry and infectious “Chaise Longue,” which unmistakably evokes late 1970s punk and spawned a viral video. The album showed that these avowed amateurs are in fact competent musicians with a knack for writing memorable songs. Varied tempos and rhythms and touches of disco and psychedelia keep the album interesting throughout. The band’s humor is fresh, and its targets are often well chosen (“You’re so woke. / Diet Coke. / I feel gross. / Oh no.”). Yet the band’s rebellion is focused on small issues, and they appear to be overwhelmed in the face of the bigger issues. The reflexive irony of singer Rhian Teasdale, too, has its limitations. Nevertheless, this debut provides hope that the band can develop not only its songwriting, but also its social perspective.

The Smile, a band featuring Radiohead’s Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood, released its debut album, *A Light for Attracting Attention*, this year. Its quiet and unsettling atmosphere is in line with Radiohead’s aesthetic. Yorke and Greenwood have put their usual thought and creativity into the music, but the attractions are textural and timbral rather than melodic. The emotional palette of Yorke’s distinctive singing is restricted to various shades of lamentation. The lyrics often resist specificity and concreteness, as if to keep the world

at arm’s length. Harvey Weinstein and climate change are mentioned obliquely. Yorke sounds occasional notes of protest against the disaster that he senses is looming, but images of people waving a white flag, shooting up or slitting their wrists predominate. The album is a cry of despair from a liberal petty bourgeois. Sound effects and intriguing arrangements do not make this perspective any more progressive or interesting.

Country singer and violinist Amanda Shires explores the vicissitudes of romantic relationships on *Take It Like a Man*. The songs, some of which are based on her own marriage to musician Jason Isbell, depict attraction, falling in love, having quarrels, making up and breaking up. Shires has a clear, sure voice with a distinctive, poignant trill that suggests vulnerability. But her lyrics, however true or sincere, are generally not as striking or penetrating as they have been on other albums such as *To the Sunset* (2018). Some risk banality. A few personal details might have made the lyrics more compelling. Moreover, the album gets bogged down in slow songs and even slower songs. Even “Stupid Love,” which is about new romance and evokes the Hi Rhythm Section, feels languid. Shires’s singing is affecting and attractive throughout, but it’s not adequate to carry the album on its own. Shires is capable of creativity and humor, but those qualities are missing here.

On her fourth album, *Spirituals*, Santigold continues her intriguing mixture of dub, new wave and dance music, but with much less inspiration. Compared with her outstanding 2008 debut, the tempos are the same, and the interesting arrangements still contain flashes of wit, but the melodies are not memorable, and the singing lacks spark. The comparative standouts, “My Horror” and “High Priestess,” encapsulate these weaknesses. Songs like the jazzy and sassy “Shake” testify to Santigold’s enduring creativity but feel willed rather than natural. A hopeful sign is “No Paradise,” which highlights the struggle against oppression. Still, its tone is more resigned than defiant. Underneath the piquant arrangements, the album is comparatively wan, subdued and listless. It’s a shame that it does not contain the sharp and frank analysis that the singer displayed in her comments about the challenges of touring during the pandemic—and about the exploitative nature of the music industry.



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