

Popular music and jazz in 2023, a selection

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The past year was marked by intensifying crises not seen in multiple generations. As they had on billions around the planet, these events had a tangible impact on large numbers of musicians and singers.

The Israeli government's brutal and ongoing assault, fully backed by the White House, against the population of Gaza quickly revealed its genocidal character and intent. The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to claim lives and inflict long-term harm on millions with the tacit consent of the world's governments. The proxy war between US-NATO and Russia has ground on, killing or wounding approximately a half million Ukrainians and Russians. Fascistic parties have gained ground and threatened the destruction of democratic rights in various countries.

But most importantly workers and youth have rebelled against these intolerable conditions, both with strike waves and now global demonstrations against the genocide in Gaza, which are also a daily feature of social life.

The most urgent and relevant musical developments in 2023 took place not in recorded albums and songs, but rather on concert stages. Musicians and singers have taken vocal and visible stands in opposition to the genocide in Gaza and other forms of ongoing oppression. The most powerful among these has been This Is Not A Drill, the concert tour of legendary musician Roger Waters (formerly of Pink Floyd), which has now traveled across three continents over the last 15 months and been viewed by hundreds of thousands of participants, and possibly millions.

Waters and his team have used their artistic talents to make a powerful and urgent statement against fascism, militarism, social misery and nuclear war. The tour has given the sharpest musical expression to the sentiments of vast layers of the population, who oppose the horrors in Gaza and Ukraine. For his honest stand, Waters has faced relentless political censorship efforts by the ruling class in the US, Europe and Latin America, as well as a sordid collection of pro-Zionist outfits.

An important development among musicians and vocalists in the last three months of 2023 has been the growing number who are loudly opposing the genocidal, US-backed assault by Israel on the Palestinians in Gaza.

In early November, scores of musicians and singers around the world signed an open letter urging President Joe Biden and the US Congress to call for an immediate de-escalation and ceasefire, including Jennifer Lopez, Selena Gomez, Ani DiFranco, Boots Riley, Brian Eno, Cat Power, Drake, Devonté Hynes, Dua Lipa, Caroline Polachek, rap duo Run the Jewels, Michael Stipe, Bjork, Chelsea Wolfe, and others. British rapper Lowkey and Chilean rapper-musician Ana Tijoux have been early and leading critics of the hourly horrors unfolding in Gaza.

Protests against and denunciations of the mass murder in Gaza by musicians and other artists have become a regular and praiseworthy occurrence. In mid-November, 19-year-old US rapper Redveil (Marcus Morton) used his set at the popular music festival Camp Flog Gnar Carnival to encourage the large, youthful crowd to chant "Free Palestine!," while he movingly projected all the names of the Palestinian children murdered by the Israel Defense Forces as of that time.

Over 250 electronic music DJs in Britain denounced the complicity of the Sunak government in the Israeli genocide, and pledged not to perform

in spaces and collectives that "ignore the violence of colonialism while simultaneously profiting from the creativity of musicians and artists from the global South and diaspora communities." Dozens of leading musicians and singers in Bangladesh held a concert "To Gaza from Dhaka" in support of the besieged Gazan population on November 24.

In late December, hip-hop groups Massive Attack and Young Fathers joined with post-punk group Fontaines D.C. to announce a vinyl EP called *Ceasefire*, with all profits going to fund Doctors Without Borders' aid efforts in Gaza and the West Bank. At the end of December, rappers Macklemore and Residente used concerts and social media statements to oppose genocide and denounce Biden as a war criminal.

Other forms of protests could be added to these important developments among musicians, including those who have maintained steadfast opposition to the systematic destruction of COVID protections for musicians and audiences, including rock groups Deerhoof and The Anchoress.

Some of this growing opposition found reflection in the year's recorded musical offerings. But unfortunately very little of it is artistically worked through or fully realized yet. Far too often musicians still prefer to "look inward" for musical inspiration instead, with an overwhelming number of popular releases focusing on themes limited almost entirely to personal relationships, despair and/or nostalgia.

The influence of identity politics still holds far too much sway over the musical output of prominent artists as well, often coupled with a helping of escapism. This was manifest on "critically lauded" releases such as Yaya Bey's *Exodus the North Star*, Janelle Monáe's *The Age of Pleasure* and the critically praised *The Record* by "supergroup" Boygenius. The political dead-end of black nationalism continues to resurface on still too many "left" albums as well, particularly in jazz. The bankruptcy of this outlook hampers some albums that exhibit strong instincts in other capacities, such as opposition to militarism, as on the recent album *Sundial* by Chicago rapper Noname.

Money, careerism and conformity still dominate the highest levels of pop music. Taylor Swift, one of the most popular artists in the world, spent the year re-recording her old albums, on her way to becoming a billionaire, joining the ranks of other musician-billionaires like Rihanna and Jay-Z.

Billions flow into the pockets of a handful of performers and musicians, while the vast majority of musicians and performers earn next to nothing. *Rolling Stone* noted recently that in August the *New York Times* "reported estimates that ... [Swift's] Eras tour 'could generate some \$4.6 billion in economic activity in North America alone, taking into account both stadium capacity and people's reported spending plans on things like tickets, merchandise and travel,' while it was estimated that the [Beyoncé's] *Renaissance* tour would reach \$4.5 billion in spending. The Eras tour concert film, which captured a straight run-through of the three-hour-long show, opened to \$92.8 million in North America. *Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé*, the latest documentary-concert entry in her legacy-shaping filmography, opened at \$22 million."

Streaming, proclaimed to be a great democratizing technology, has, in fact, widened the economic divide. In 2020, the top 10 percent of artists

accounted for 99.4 percent of all streams, also according to *Rolling Stone*. In April 2022, *Music Business Worldwide* pointed out that nearly 80 percent “of artists on Spotify today—around 6.3 million of them—have a monthly audience on the platform *smaller* than 50 people.” Some 0.2 percent of the eight million artists (16,000 individuals) on Spotify “are generating \$50k-plus a year from the platform,” i.e., are actually making a living from music.

The concentration of wealth is not the only affliction the music industry, or parts of it, suffers from. Bigotry and reaction have also found a voice in popular music, as in Jason Aldean’s “Try That in a Small Town.” The country singer filmed the video for his song at a Tennessee courthouse that was the site of a 1933 lynching. The content of the music video made clear that it was intended to stoke racial and social hatreds, specifically targeting leftwing protests emerging in the US. Oliver Anthony’s “Rich Men North of Richmond” was a phony protest song that pretended to speak for the working class and poor. In fact, it promoted racism and antisemitism while blaming the poor for their own problems.

Modern life, including its dominant social and class features, is still poorly served by popular music. So much continues to be diffuse, vague and uninterestingly subjective. To be frank, not everyone’s feelings are all that compelling. By and large, serious attention to malignant social inequality and social misery is sorely lacking.

The moods, experiences and living, breathing reality of workers and youth bound up with the growing opposition to genocide and other social ills and crimes still remain outside the realm of recorded music. Popular music artists have a lot of catching up to do. But the ongoing savagery, sickness and repression are changing artists’ perspectives. They will do well to take a cue from Waters, and those now using their concert stages to oppose genocide and war. We look forward to such developments.

We offer below a list of releases that struck us as interesting, challenging or musically invigorating in 2023. More music than ever is being released each year. Not much of what is popular or heavily promoted strikes a chord, and the strongest music often must be actively sought. For these reasons, our list can only be provisional, but it reflects some of the more creative and thoughtful efforts of the year.

Jazz Albums

There continue to be interesting musical developments in jazz. The Chicago-based group Magic Carpet released a musically ambitious album, anchored by a gifted rhythm section that includes the persistently innovative drummer Makaya McCraven. Their willingness to explore rhythmic interpretations from a broad range of global musical sounds was consistently rewarding. The Brooklyn trio Scree, led by guitarist Ryan El-Solh, released an interesting record based on interpretations of poems by the late Palestinian “resistance poet” Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008). Saxophonist Joshua Redman and trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire – the latter with the excellent guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Herlin Riley – each released albums centered around soulful and serious compositions.

Broken Compass – Magic Carpet (US)

Jasmine on a Night in July – Scree (US)

Continuing – Tyshawn Sorey Trio (US)

Dahab Days – Rob Luft (UK)

where are we – Joshua Redman (US)

Owl Song – Ambrose Akinmusire (US)

Electronic, Instrumental and Soul/Folk Albums

The Peruvian-German artist Sofia Kourtesis and the British electronic artist Pangaea (Kevin McAuley) made two of the most exciting and refreshingly innovative electronic albums of the year. Both pursued sounds and textures that, in different ways, were both danceable and sonically optimistic at their most effective. The Tunisian artist Deena Abdelwaheed melded Middle Eastern and North African dance music with industrial sounds, creating an interesting and somewhat sonically unique sound.

British soul singer Yazmin Lacey released one of the more intriguing vocal music albums this year, buoyed by a confident jazz-influenced musical infrastructure. The Irish folk artist John Francis Lynn released an album mostly of traditional interpretations, but they were unusually punchy and at their best contained an interesting element of anti-establishment anger.

**Electronic*

Madres – Sofia Kourtesis (Peru/Germany)

Changing Channels – Pangaea (UK)

Jbal Rrsas – Deena Abdelwahed (Tunisia)

**Folk/Soul/Rock*

Look Over the Wall, See the Sky – John Francis Lynn (Ireland)

Voice Notes – Yazmin Lacey (UK)

Everything Is Alive – Slowdive (UK)

The Price of Progress – The Hold Steady (US)

**Instrumental/Classical*

Marzipan – Charif Megarbane (Lebanon)

Xertermin/ Sherter Solo – Mamer (China)

My Strong Will – Girma Yifrashewa (Ethiopia)

Tamiditine – Moussa Tchingou (Niger)

Songs

One of the few popular songs to strike a resonant chord this year was the appropriately titled “It Must Change” by ANOHNI and the Johnsons. The singer created one of the few songs so far that soulfully grapples with moods and sentiments that dominated broad layers by the end of the year. While rueful, it also stays firmly planted in the insistence that there is no option but to overturn the present conditions.

“It Must Change” – ANOHNI and the Johnsons (UK)

“How Music Makes You Feel Better” – Sofia Kourtesis (Peru/Germany)

“Fallout” – Yo La Tengo (US)

“Quarry” – Wednesday (US)

“Evangeline” – Colter Wall (Canada)



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