

The year in music: Favorite recordings of 2013

By our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site music writers Hiram Lee, Zac Corrigan, and Matthew Brennan have compiled lists of what they thought were the most interesting efforts in popular music in 2013.

A wide range of musical genres is represented, including rock, jazz, country, hip hop and electronic music. While there were works to be found in each of these categories that were sincere and rich in a number of ways, on the whole there remains too little engagement with the world in music today. There are too few artists who dig deeply into the complexities of real life—a vital undertaking even for those artists whose works are not explicitly political in their content or whose works are purely instrumental. There remains too much that is academic, too much that is merely private tinkering and too much that is entirely contrived. There is too little which feels real and lived in.

The works included below, in our view, rose above these general problems in varying ways and contributed something more meaningful and genuine.

Matthew Brennan

The common threads among the albums I found to be interesting were consistent sincerity and the musical ability to convey emotion in a compelling manner. Other artists were able to do so in smaller measure (see the song selection). Some selections in jazz, electronic or instrumental music stood out for me due to their unusual warmth (Jon Hopkins, Glenn Jones, Chucho Valdes), their ability to engagingly convey some of the ominous quality of the present period (Tim Hecker) or their sheer sonic power (some of the individual songs).

Bill Callahan's *Dream River* was the best album I listened to this year. It is a sincere work, complemented by his deep, unmistakable voice and his layered, purposeful storytelling. In performance, Callahan's patience, warmth, emotional depth, humor and confident sense of musical direction come across even more vibrantly.

The most heartbreaking musical recording I heard in 2013 was Sibelius' "Waltz Triste," as performed by the Minnesota Orchestra, in the last piece of music conducted by Osmo Vänskä with the orchestra. As has been reported on by the WSWS, the symphony orchestra—whose players are now in the fifteenth month of a lockout by management—is at the forefront, along with the Detroit Institute of Arts, of the nationwide assault on culture and cultural institutions.

The urgency of the situation is hauntingly captured in Vänskä's

request that the audience not applaud at the conclusion. The point is driven home by the sound of the conductor's footsteps as he leaves the stage. The performance is simultaneously wrenching and infuriating, and provides a small glimpse into the situation facing serious artists—and the working class as a whole—in the present period.

Best Albums:

Dream River, Bill Callahan

Immunity, Jon Hopkins

Songbook, Allen Toussaint

Virgins, Tim Hecker

Border-Free, Chucho Valdes

My Garden State, Glenn Jones

Symphonies No. 1 & 4, Jean Sibelius (as performed by the Minnesota Orchestra)

Best Songs:

"Retrograde," James Blake

"Open Eye Signal," Jon Hopkins

"Who's Gonna Help Brother Get Further?," Allen Toussaint

"Beautiful Africa," Rokia Traore

"Ice (El Hielo)," La Santa Celia

"Corpus," Daniel Wohl

"Shaker Aamer," PJ Harvey

"Borrowed Time," Parquet Courts

"It's Raining," Allen Toussaint

"Velez," Livity Sounds

"La Bestia," La Vida Boheme

"Reach For The Dead," Boards of Canada

"Blue Crystal Fire," Robbie Basho

"Just Make It Stop," Low

"Orbits," Wayne Shorter

"Touch," Daft Punk (with Paul Williams)

"Where Are We Now?," David Bowie

"Gnossienne #3," Van-anh Vanessa Vo

"Body and Soul," William Onyeabor

"Hager Fiker," Mulatu Astatke

Zac Corrigan

Bill Callahan, *Dream River* (album) *Dream River* is a strong collection of musical stories and meditations. Callahan, 47, has a resonant baritone voice, a patient delivery and a poetic ability to set a scene with a few quick lines: "The road is dangerous, pretty

and white/tires spinnin' on snow/world spinnin' heavy and slow." He loves nature, and employs lush metaphors that bring out the sensuousness of living. Flutes, tastefully affected guitars and hand-drums accompany him and flesh out the scenery or whip up a storm. The many highlights include: "Small Plane"—a quiet ode to reliable partnership—and "Ride My Arrow"—in which a small animal in the clasp of an eagle contemplates the meaning of life.

James Blake, "Retrograde" (from the album *Overgrown*)

Human vulnerability often finds powerful expression through music. Here, the anxiety and exhilaration of young love are conveyed masterfully by British 25-year-old singer-pianist-producer Blake. When a buzzing synthesizer crescendos into the chorus, and Blake sings "Suddenly I'm hit!," one's heart rises with it into one's throat. The music, the performance and the production together go right to the nerves, conveying an intimate and contradictory emotional experience with an intensity that's true to life.

Yo La Tengo, "Ohm" (from the album *Fade*)

Yo La Tengo's "Ohm" is a song about persevering together through tough times. "Sometimes the bad guys come out on top/sometimes the good guys lose/we try not to lose our hearts/not to lose our minds," it begins. The music conveys sympathy and understanding. The steady rhythm seems like it will soldier on forever. Electric guitarist Ira Kaplan's playing is wonderful as always—melodic and freewheeling, with beautiful tone and effects.

Danny Brown, "Torture" (from the album *Old*)

On "Torture," Detroit rapper Danny Brown, in sometimes shocking imagery, describes a litany of mental and physical tortures that he faced as a child growing up in poverty. "I feel like a prisoner of war/Reacting sporadically to what the mind absorb." Gangster rap this is not (though the rest of the album is more problematic).

Oneohtrix Point Never, *R Plus 7* (album)

The abstract music on *R Plus 7* is playful, strange and beautiful, and expresses something about the rhythms and textures of contemporary life. Highlights include tracks "Zebra" and "Problem Areas".

Charles Bradley (feat. Menahan Street Band), "Confusion" (from the album *Victim of Love*)

Bradley, now 65, was impoverished when he began moonlighting as a James Brown impersonator in Brooklyn in 1996. He always performs with sincerity, and when he sings of hardship his rough voice can express great pain and striving. Backed here by the very good Menahan Street Band, he sings of "confusion all over the world."

PJ Harvey, "Shaker Aamer" (See "Songwriter PJ Harvey releases song protesting treatment of Guantánamo Bay hunger striker")

Some interesting Electronic Dance Music:

Daft Punk, *Random Access Memories*,

Joe, "Slope" and "Club Scared".

Tessela, *Nancy's Pantry*.

DJ Rashad, *Rollin'* (especially the track "Let it Go") and *Double Cup*

Also worth listening to:

Tim Hecker, "Live Room"

Kingdom, "Bank Head" (feat. Kelela)

Mala, "Changes" (James Blake's "Harmonimix")

Objekt, "Fishbone"

Hiram Lee

Jazz:

The Willie Jones III Sextet, *The Willie Jones III Sextet Plays the Max Roach Songbook*

Kenny Wheeler with Norma Winstone and the London Vocal Project, *Mirrors*

The New Gary Burton Quartet, *Guided Tour*

Christian McBride Trio, *Out Here*

Craig Hartley, *Books on Tape, Volume 1*

Alexis Cuadrado, *A Lorca Soundscape*

Wayne Shorter Quartet, *Without a Net*

Charles Lloyd and Jason Moran, *Hagar's Song*

Kikoski/Carpenter/Novak/Sheppard, *From the Hip*

Chuck Israels Jazz Orchestra, *Second Wind: A Tribute to the Music of Bill Evans*

Cyrus Chestnut, *Soul Brother Cool*

JD Allen, *Grace*

Pop:

Mark Knopfler, *Privateering* *

Guy Clark, *My Favorite Picture of You*

Valerie June, *Pushin' Against a Stone*

Smith Westerns, *Soft Will*

David Bowie, *The Next Day*

Vijay Iyer & Mike Ladd, *Holding it Down: The Veterans' Dreams Project*

The Features, *The Features*

Aaron Neville, *My True Story*

Lorde, "Royals"

Perera Elsewhere, "Bizarre"

PJ Harvey, "Shaker Aamer"

*released in the UK in 2012 but unavailable in the US until this year

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