

Popular music in 2016

By Hiram Lee and Matthew Brennan
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Much of the popular music released in North America this past year was uninspired and superficial. Some of it was merely empty-headed and crude. Chart-topping artists like Bruno Mars and Kanye West were content to sing hymns to their own egos and careers. As it turns out, listening to performers sing or rap about how wealthy and successful they are is perhaps twice as boring as simply hearing someone talk about it.

Those artists who did turn their attention to real life faced a genuine obstacle in their path. The presence on the more “socially-conscious” albums this year of conceptions bound up with identity politics and racist perspectives was pervasive. Questions of war, poverty, and social devastation—affecting hundreds of millions of people of every race, gender, and nationality around the world—were largely ignored.

It is critical for artists to overcome decades of anti-working class conceptions that have been nearly ubiquitous in universities and upper-middle class intellectual circles. A broader concern with social life in all its complexity, and with the working class itself, is urgently needed from artists, including musicians.

Many prominent musicians considered vaguely to be “socially conscious”—including singers (and siblings) Solange and Beyoncé, rappers Common and Kendrick Lamar—visited the White House this year to meet with, perform for and celebrate the Obamas. Nothing very good, and certainly nothing oppositional, will come from such layers.

But there were others whose music showed concern for wider layers of people, whose work was animated by a genuine sense of protest and whose love songs were more passionate and truthful than the rest. Whatever limitations their music may contain, the artists listed below, in our view, created some of the more moving and meaningful works this year.

Hiram Lee

Pop

While there were significant contributions from veteran R&B singers like William Bell and Aaron Neville, many of the better “pop” albums came from the world of country music. There was a tendency, however, for even some of the better performers to imitate their inspirations a little too exactly, sometimes turning out nostalgic carbon copies of music from an earlier period (Kelsey Waldon). Others closer to Nashville have something to say, but tend to be a little too slick and inoffensive for their own—or anyone else’s—good (Brandy Clark and Mark Chesnutt).

Paul Burch—*Meridian Rising*
William Bell—*This is Where I Live*
PJ Harvey—*The Hope Six Demolition Project*
Sturgill Simpson—*A Sailor’s Guide to Earth*
Robert Ellis—*Robert Ellis*
Brandy Clark—*Big Day in a Small Town*
Shovels and Rope—*Little Seeds*
Mark Chesnutt—*Tradition Lives*
Aaron Neville—*Apache*
Andrew Bird—*Are You Serious*
Kelsey Waldon—*I’ve Got A Way*

Jazz

Arriving at a list of favorite jazz albums required sifting through a lot of pseudo-R&B, overly academic works rich on math but low on feeling and works by self-indulgent free jazz performers who couldn’t resist interrupting a groove every few measures with some off-time flourish of drum rolls or squeaking saxophone reeds—drowning in a stream of consciousness.

These works stood out. Not all of it will please traditionalists.

Ralph Peterson Trio—*Triangular III*
Herlin Riley—*New Direction*

Houston Person & Ron Carter—*Chemistry*
Murray, Allen & Carrington [David Murray, Geri Allen & Terri Lyne Carrington]—*Perfection*
Omer Avital—*Abutbul Music*
Charles Lloyd & The Marvels—*I Long to See You*
Matthew Hartnett—*Southern Comfort*
Allen Toussaint—*American Tunes*
John Scofield—*Country for Old Men*
Branford Marsalis Quartet w/ Kurt Elling—*Upward Spiral*

Matthew Brennan

Albums

These were albums that I felt conveyed, or attempted to convey, human and humane qualities with a notable sensitivity or creativity. There was the warmth and playfulness in the John Prine duets, the thoughtful and engaging samples and songs crafted by Oddisee and Moodymann, and the empathetic voices Courtney Marie Andrews and Robbie Fulks give to the characters in their songs.

It is also notable that PJ Harvey (and though less musically rewarding, ANOHNI as well) wrote an album almost entirely dedicated to grappling with the official hypocrisy of the Obama administration.

I was also moved by the more subdued, but thoughtful jazz albums by Jeff Parker (of Tortoise) and the Wolfgang Muthspiel Quintet. And there were a number of interesting if uneven field recordings from Africa during the 1950s, 60s and 70s released this year (for example, Paul Bowles' 1959 Morocco recordings and the "Wake Up You" Nigerian rock recordings of the mid-1970s), but I thought the one that was most rewarding was the Bobo Yeye collection from post-colonial Burkina Faso during the 1960s and 70s.

John Prine—*For Better, Or Worse*
Oddisee—*The Odd Tape*
PJ Harvey—*The Hope Six Demolition Project*
Bobo Yeye: Belle Époque In Upper Volta (Collected Artists)
Wolfgang Muthspiel—*Rising Grace*
Jeff Parker—*The New Breed*
Courtney Marie Andrews—*Honest Life*
Robbie Fulks—*Upland Stories*
Moodymann—*DJ Kicks*

Individual songs

John Prine & Fiona Prine (Elvis Presley cover)—"My Happiness"
Caleb Klauder & Reeb Willms (Buck Owens cover)—"There Goes My Love"
Charles Bradley—"Good To Be Back Home"
Frankie Cosmos—"On The Lips"
Frank Ocean—"Pink + White"
Hamilton Leithauser & Rostam—"A 1000 Times"
Hamilton Leithauser & Rostam—"1959"
Hope Sandoval & Kurt Vile—"Let Me Get There"
Kevin Morby—"I Have Been To The Mountain"
The Handsome Family—"Gold"
Anderson .Paak—"The Dreamer"
Andrew Bird & Fiona Apple—"Left Handed Kisses"
PJ Harvey—"The Wheel"
ANOHNI—"Drone Bomb Me"
Jeff Parker—"Cliché"
Leyla McCalla—"A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey"
Ryley Walker—"The Roundabout"
Jessy Lanza—"Oh No"
KING—"The Greatest"

Instrumental/Electronic Music

LMYE—"Cali 76"
Jefre Cantu-Ledesma—"Love's Refrain"
Carl Gari & Abdullah Miniawy—"Darraje"
Khun Narin—"Chackim"
Explosions In The Sky—"Logic Of A Dream"
The Range—"Florida"
Glenn Jones—"Flower Turned Inside Out"
Nathan Bowles—"Gadarene Fugue"

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