

Interesting music in 2014 so far

By our reporters
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With the first half of 2014 now over, *World Socialist Web Site* music reviewers have selected a number of albums and individual songs they feel are among the more interesting and successful efforts in popular music during the year so far.

The works included below are among the best of an otherwise generally unimpressive crop of new releases. One still has to do a great deal of sifting to find music that captures something sharp and intriguing about real life. Far too much is trivial or self-involved. This is true of both mainstream and so-called independent works. One strains to come up with the names of artists and albums who could justifiably populate a list of “best” music.

While one could acknowledge certain reservations here and there, the recordings discussed in the contributions below aim at something more.

Hiram Lee

In addition to *Nikki Nack* by Tune-Yards, which I reviewed here, I’ve returned to the following albums many times this year:

The Lights from the Chemical Plant—Robert Ellis

The music of country singer Robert Ellis covers a wide range of feeling and experience. A picture of life emerges from his songs, particularly as it is lived in the more remote and struggling areas of the American South. Ellis knows this world very well. If his voice at times is too thin, it is at least almost always sincere.

“Houston,” about the singer’s love-hate relationship with his hometown of Houston, Texas, is beautiful and sad. “TV Song,” about living vicariously through television, is moving and insightful. Ellis never mocks ordinary people or condescends to his audience. His take on Paul Simon’s “Still Crazy After All These Years” is also very strong.

Chicago Fire—Eric Alexander

Tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander has produced one of the more enjoyable jazz albums of the year thus far. It is a lively, swinging collection of songs. Veteran pianist Harold Mabern accompanies the saxophonist throughout, and the talented young trumpeter Jeremy Pelt joins in on three songs.

“Eddie Harris,” Alexander’s tribute to the soul-jazz musician of that name, is thoroughly entertaining. It is all too rare today to hear a jazz recording that provokes hand-clapping and foot stomping. Alexander is looking to connect with people. His playing is smart and serious, but it avoids the academic or the more obscure and pretentious qualities plaguing so much of the music today.

Alexander’s high-speed take on “Just One of Those Things” is also invigorating. Drummer Joe Farnsworth’s incredibly fast sticking on the ride cymbal is like a hummingbird hovering over a

flower. One loses one’s breath while listening.

Matthew Brennan

In terms of albums, very little has made an impression thus far, from start to finish. Artists in the jazz and singer-songwriter genres are making notable attempts to express moods within the wider population, but almost none of it is worked out coherently. There are strong individual songs about love and loss, beauty and sadness, and the difficulties of day-to-day life, but these tend to be few and far between. Popular anger and discontentment continues to be expressed fairly poorly, if at all.

Notable albums:

Lost in the Dream—The War On Drugs

Of the albums I have been able to listen to this year, *Lost in the Dream* from The War on Drugs has been the most engaging. It feels like one of the more well thought-out albums from start to finish. Lead singer and songwriter Adam Granduciel ostensibly portrays the difficulties, and ending, of something resembling a relationship between two people, or a group of people. However, instead of drawing attention to the faults or specific episodes of individuals involved, Granduciel tends to convey an atmosphere of external pressures, physical weariness and encroaching darkness. The music, however, often conveys an enduring warmth and optimism that brings the feelings to life and keeps one’s head above water.

Sunbathing Animal—Parquet Courts

Parquet Courts’ second album continues to build on the punchy, lively garage rock of its predecessor. Despite some repetitive qualities and lyrics that aren’t always terribly direct, the anger and urgency of the music feels much more invigorating than the increasingly darker or resigned qualities of some of their contemporaries in the world of “indie rock” (Cloud Nothings, Ty Segall, Real Estate, Grimes, Mac DeMarco, etc.) They are still only circling around moods of indignation that need to be explored more deeply, but with this album the Brooklyn band is getting closer to something more significant.

Memoryhouse (Re-Issue)—Max Richter

This 2002 vinyl release fell out of print several years ago, but was re-issued this year on CD under the *Fat Cat* record label. German-born, British composer Max Richter often combines rueful, contemplative moods with stark, rising string orchestrations. When successful, his songs can contain strong elements of protest and apprehension. This album, Richter’s first, offers a chance to get acquainted with his particular form of “minimal” classical compositions, which have become more

interesting in some of his subsequent releases, in particular *The Blue Notebooks*, *Songs From Before* and the soundtrack for the movie *Waltz with Bashir*.

Notable individual songs:

“Just Can’t Win”—Lee Fields and the Expressions

“People Don’t Get What They Deserve”—Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings

“A Dream of You and Me”—Future Islands

“Come & See”—Promartyr

“Landmarks”—Brian Blade and The Fellowship

“Ave Cesaria”—Stromae

“Eyes To The Wind”—The War On Drugs

“Corrosive”—Millie & Andrea

“Jerk Ribs”—Kelis

“The Beauty of Dissolving Portraits”—Ambrose Akinmusire

Nick Barrickman

Both choices on this list are attempts by more sensitive artists to reflect on the nature of the music industry, as well as broader social questions, perhaps indirectly. Both artists are more or less established and respected mainstays within the hip hop world, which perhaps gives them a certain amount of artistic breathing space to air such sentiments.

And Then You Shoot Your Cousin—The Roots

A dark offering from the veteran hip hop band, suggesting the decay that has come to represent the modern hip hop world. Replete with delicately orchestrated and haunting melodies provided by drummer/producer Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) among others, the album provides a backdrop for Roots’ lead vocalist Black Thought (Tariq Trotter) and other rappers to depict the goings-on of various fictitious characters in a society mostly devoid of hope or compassion.

Even as they have their strengths, The Roots often focus too narrowly on the obviously absurd and backward “gangsta rap” stereotypes promoted by the mainstream culture without attempting to get at the deeper causes behind their emergence and popularity. The result is one-sided, if well-intentioned. The strongest songs on the album include “Never,” “Black Rock” and “Tomorrow.”

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—Pharoahe Monch

PTSD features veteran Queens, New York lyricist Pharoahe Monch (b. Troy D. Jamerson, 1972) rapping in his trademark dense and complex rhyme style in an effort to express his frustration working within the music industry. The album is named after the well-known anxiety disorder prevalent among war veterans, including of course those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While it has its limitations, the album’s theme and atmosphere speak to a music industry madhouse that has driven Jamerson’s character to seek refuge on an independent label. The work possesses impressive vocal performances from Jamerson, who is intelligent but never takes himself too seriously. The album reflects the difficulties and disorientation of even some of the more well-intentioned artists within capitalist society. The album features dramatic production from veteran beat makers Jesse West, Lee Stone and Marco Polo. The strongest songs include “Time2”

and “Broken Again.”

Zac Corrigan

Favorite songs from the first half of 2014:

Electronic/Vocal:

“Do Better”—Fatima (produced by Floating Points)

“Begin to Begin”—Lone

“Somethin’ ‘Bout the Things You Do”—DJ Rashad (featuring Gant-Man)

“Balloons”—Objekt

“Explode”—Big Freedia

“2 is 8”—Lone

Rock :

“I Love My Dad”—Sun Kil Moon

“Black and White”—Parquet Courts

“A Dream of You and Me”—Future Islands

“Ocean Between the Waves”—War on Drugs

Some words about some of the music:

British producer Lone released the LP *Reality Testing* in June. His productions are lush as usual (see also his 2012 LP *Galaxy Garden*). His latest marries hip hop and house music sensibilities in varying proportions. Sunny, warm feelings are felt throughout, and a few nice melodies.

DJ Rashad died shortly before the release of his 2014 EP called *We on One*. In 2013 he released an LP and two EPs worth of Juke music (also known as Footwork), which is a dance music style centered in Chicago. His recent work has brought the style to a wider audience than ever before. The best of it introduces the frantic rhythms of Juke to pop melodies and more complicated song structures. “Somethin’ ‘Bout the Things You Do” is built up from samples of the song “I Feel for You,” written by Prince and recorded by Chaka Kahn, Melle Mel and Stevie Wonder in 1984.

Big Freedia is the preeminent Bounce music rapper. Bounce is a regional style of call-and-response dance music from New Orleans that broke out to a wider audience following Hurricane Katrina, when residents who had to relocate brought the music to other cities. His best work is fun and cathartic. On *Explode*: “Release your job/release the stress/release your love/forget the rest.”

Baltimore’s Future Islands make slightly melancholy synth-pop music. Lead singer Samuel T. Herring has an emotive baritone voice and a theatrical delivery. His melodramatic gestures and all-in dance moves helped garner the band national attention after a performance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. On “Dream of You and Me” there is a nice interplay between keyboards and guitars, providing a shimmering, splashing impression to accompany lyrics about seaside introspection.

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