

The year in popular music

30 December 2015

Sorting out the year's most meaningful works in pop music and jazz requires a lot of sifting and the rejection of a lot of fool's gold. Much of what was released this year felt far removed from the most pressing issues confronting the world today. Many musicians who turned to more intimate problems produced works that felt contrived and more than a little self-involved.

So-called indie rock, in particular, has a habit of feeling sorry for itself. Many of these musicians are apparently under the impression that pulling a long face and recording one sullen track after another is what "serious" musicians do.

In many ways, this "alternative" music pales in comparison to some of the livelier, more confident, and better sung songs that have dominated the radio since the end of last year—one thinks of Taylor Swift's "Shake it Off" or "Uptown Funk" by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars.

Interestingly, alt-rocker Ryan Adams re-recorded Taylor Swift's popular album *1989* in its entirety this year, presumably an effort to give the pop songwriting at its core a more "serious" presentation. In doing so, he took some of the catchiest pop songs of the last year and a half and made them sound as joyless and dull as possible.

There is also the case of musicians like country singer Steve Earle, outspoken and oppositional during the years of the Bush administration, who have mellowed considerably during the Obama presidency. Earle once sang movingly about the "Rich Man's War" on his 2004 album *The Revolution Starts Now*. His latest effort *Terraplane* is a standard baby-left-me blues eerily silent when it comes to today's crisis.

Not everyone held their tongues. Artists like Kendrick Lamar, MIA, Caexico and Conor Oberst's *Desparecidos* (Disappeared ones), to name a few, wrote songs about police violence, the refugee crisis, poverty, government spying and Wall Street greed. Few of these, however, ranked among the most artistically satisfying works this year. In many cases, they remained surface-deep, and the outlook of these artists was at times quite bleak. More than a few view the world through the narrow and reactionary lens of racial and gender politics.

Singer Janelle Monáe recorded "Hell You Talmbout" this

year, a bitter roll call of those murdered by police. She later attended a march against police brutality in Philadelphia holding a sign reading "Black Girl Magic."

A greater seriousness about the world is urgently required. The conviction that what is happening is wrong is necessary but not enough. A rejection of bourgeois politics and a careful working through of fundamental social and historical questions are essential for the development of art.

Below are the works we found to be among the most truthful and entertaining in 2015.

Hiram Lee

Pop

Sam Lee and Friends – *The Fade in Time*
 Rhiannon Giddens – *Tomorrow is My Turn/Factory Girl*
 Chris Stapleton – *Traveller*
 Donnie Fritts – *Oh My Goodness*
 Vieux Farka Touré & Julia Easterlin – *Touristes*
 Jimbo Mathus – *Blue Healer*
 Leo "Bud" Welch – *I Don't Prefer No Blues*
 Dale Watson – *Call Me Insane*
 The Wood Brothers – *Paradise*
 Cage The Elephant – *Tell Me I'm Pretty*

Jazz

Christian McBride Trio – *Live at the Village Vanguard*
 Laszlo Gardony – *Life in Real Time*
 Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet – *Family First*
 Nilson Matta – *EastSideRioDrive*
 Amir ElSaffar & Two Rivers – *Crisis*
 Heads of State – *Search for Peace*
 Tony Bennett & Bill Charlap – *The Silver Lining: The Songs of Jerome Kern*
 JD Allen – *Graffiti*
 Zhenya Strigalev's Smiling Organizm – *Robin Goodie*
 Mack Avenue Superband – *Live! From the Detroit Jazz Festival 2014*
 Brad Myers – *Prime Numbers*
 Ibrahim Maalouf – *Kalthoum*
 Albert "Tootie" Heath – *Philadelphia Beat*

Matthew Brennan

Despite the present difficulties in popular music, I did encounter some fairly thoughtful, sincere, compelling and at times exciting albums, particularly among jazz and other

instrumental artists.

The expressive guitar playing of Daniel Bachman (*River*), the patient sensitivity of pianist Lawrence Fields (on both *Sound Prints* and *Stretch Music*), and the confidence of singer Toto La Momaposina (*Tambolero*) were all revelations for me this year, to cite three contributions in particular.

Other albums I found interesting concerned themselves with history. The American Civil War-era songs recorded by Anonymous 4 and Bruce Molsky were performed with a commendable appreciation for the magnitude of the event itself and the impact it had on social and historical development. The 1960s and 70s-era Cambodian music that resurfaced on the *Don't Think I've Forgotten* soundtrack felt as lively and invigorating as anything I heard in the "rock" genre this year.

Best Albums

Daniel Bachman – *River*
Anonymous 4 and Bruce Molsky – *1865*
Kamasi Washington – *The Epic*
Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll (OST)
Toto La Momposina – *Tambolero*
Ibrahim Maalouf – *Kalthoum*
Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah – *Stretch Music*
Vijay Iyer – *Break Stuff*
Robert Glasper Trio – *Covered*
Songhoy Blues – *Music in Exile*
Joe Lovano and Dave Douglas – *Sound Prints*

Other artists were able to capture honest and intimate aspects of life: relationships, loyalty, love, beauty, happiness and empathy. Generally these songs were given unique, exciting, or thoughtful musical expression. The rapper Oddisee's "That's Love" was perhaps my favorite individual song this year.

Best Songs

Oddisee – "That's Love"
Chris Stapleton – "More of You"
Mbongwana Star (featuring Konono No. 1) – "Malukayi"
Kamasi Washington – "The Rhythm Changes"
Donnie Fritts – "Errol Flynn"
Jamie xx (featuring Romy) – "Loud Places"
Missy Elliot – "Where They From"
Kelela – "Rewind"
Yo La Tengo – "I Can Feel the Ice Melting" (cover)
Bruce Molsky/Anonymous 4 – "Hard Times Come Again No More"
Bruce Molsky/Anonymous 4 – "Darling Nelly Gray"
Bomba Estereo – "Mar (Lo Que Siento)"
Leon Bridges – "Better Man"
Sufjan Stevens – "Fourth of July"

Lucinda Williams – "East Side of Town"

I also found these entries in the genre of electronic music to be exciting and innovative:

Bicep – "Just"
Floating Points – "Elania"
Call Super – "Migrant"
Dude Energy – "Renee Running"
Carmine – "Fit Siegel"
Suzanne Kraft – "Flatiron"
Dan Deacon – "Meme Generator"

Nick Barrickman

Below is a sampling of some the more interesting hip-hop produced in 2015.

Red Pill – *Look What This World Did to Us*

Detroit-area hip-hop artist Chris "Red Pill" Orick sympathizes with the poorest layers of society. He raps about unemployment and dead-end jobs as well the yearning for something better among workers and youth. At times he becomes pessimistic, but the stronger moments stand out. Favorite songs: "Meh," "Rum and Coke"

Lupe Fiasco – *Tetsuo & Youth*

A vibrant offering from the Chicago rapper. Fiasco's lyrics are dense, with oblique metaphors and "layered" feeling. At times they become a little too obscure. The rapper's more "socially conscious" material tends to veer toward identity politics. Favorite songs: "Mural," "They. Resurrect. Over. New"

Individual songs from this year that ought to be mentioned:

Oddisee – "That's Love"
Open Mike Eagle – "Dark Comedy Late Show"
Scarface – "Rooted"
Logic – "City of Stars"
Pete Rock – "90s Class Act (EK)"
Nacho Picasso & Blue Sky Black Death – "Nacho's Blues (Instrumental)"

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