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Hello, Impermanence: A Response to Rolling Stone's New List

John Amen · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

Rolling Stone's recently updated greatest-albums-of-all-time list is intriguing for the cultural, demographic, and stylistic changes it reflects, but more so for the way it illustrates the broader reality of impermanence — which includes and transcends culture, demography, and expressive modes — how all things, even the most admired aesthetic templates, over time lose their prominence, drifting toward obsolescence.

Comparing the [2012](#) and [2020](#) lists, some of the updates that strike me as notable include the elevation of 90's grunge and alt-rock influences, Radiohead's *OK Computer* promoted from 162 to 42 and *Kid A* rising from 67 to 20; additionally, Nirvana's *Nevermind* was shuffled from 17 to 6. Other striking shifts: Prince's *Purple Rain* ascended from 76 to 8. Joni Mitchell's *Blue* climbed from 30 to 3. Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*, previously at 4, is now at 18. While The Beatles held four spots in the top 10 of the 2012 list, they now occupy only two spots in the top 20: *Abbey Road* at 5, *Revolver* at 11. *Sgt. Pepper's*, long considered by various outlets, including *RS*, to be popular music's greatest LP, was demoted to 24 in the new list. I was sad to see Love's *Forever Changes* shoved from 40 in 2012 to 180 on the new list.

Hip-hop is well represented in the 2020 countdown: Kendrick Lamar's 2015 gem, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, appears at 19, Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* rocketed from 373 to 17, and Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* transitioned from 48 to 15. Notorious B.I.G.'s *Ready to Die* appears at 22, up from 134 in the 2012 list. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, a landmark fusion of hip-hop, soul, and R&B, soared from 314 to 10 on the new list. The new number 1 spot was awarded to [Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*](#), up from 6 in 2012, the project's psychedelic, soul, pop, and protest elements seemingly as relevant now as they were in 1971.

While the specifics of the new list, and the factors that may have prompted the revisions, are compelling, what I find most stirring about the 2020 upgrade is the way in which it consummately points to the natural processes of marginalization and obsolescence — culturally, yes, but also existentially and evolutionarily — the rearrangements that take place as months, years, decades, centuries, and millennia pass. There's something fascinating and predictable about the relocation of *Sgt. Pepper's*, a microcosmic adjustment that highlights a macrocosmic principle. I can't help but wonder: in another, say, twenty years, will it even be in the top 50?

I remember being on vacation once around 2017 or so. My wife and I met a guy in his early twenties. A group of us started talking about music, and he confessed that he'd never heard of

David Bowie. While some of the people in the conversation were disdainful, I found this oddly refreshing. A friend of mine who teaches college says that many of his students might know The Beatles by name but that most of them probably wouldn't be able to name a Beatles song or reference any of their melodies or lyrics. Some might find this distressing. I, again, find it refreshing and somehow inspiring, even liberating, an affirmation of an enduring reality: life and its content are impermanent. The revolving door spins, yesterday's manifesto buried beneath a palimpsest of subsequent innovations. This, rather than being considered a threat, can be regarded as a siren call into the present, an opportunity to be curious rather than resistant, to study with humor the inevitable deprioritization of everything one holds sacred.

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