

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

My Favorite Albums of 2020

John Amen · Wednesday, December 16th, 2020

Nine months of lockdown or semi-lockdown. COVID-19 ravaging the globe. Isolation, disconnection, economic crises. The months leading up to the election. The election. Post-election. 2020 was filled with unique challenges as well as magnified versions of the challenges we already faced. Through it all, art offered and offers a complement, a metaphor, solace, attunement, guidance, confrontation, immersion, transcendence. One is obviously on shaky ground when throwing around words such as “best”; however, this year I reflected: which albums did I return to the most, which albums kept intriguing me no matter how many times I listened? Using this criteria, I arrived at the list below – my twenty-seven favorite albums of the year. Happy holidays, and all my best for an inspired 2021.

1.



Waxahatchee – *Saint Cloud*

Katie Crutchfield’s fifth album is an Americana gem, her generation’s *Exile on Main Street*. A seamless blend of folk-rock beats and textures, irresistible melodies, and top-tier lyricism, *Saint Cloud* is the most ambitious and fully realized project of the singer-songwriter’s career and, for me, the most enduringly enchanting set of 2020.

2.



Phoebe Bridgers – *Punisher*

Bridgers’ second album illustrates the singer-songwriter’s sirenic vocal skills, poetic precision, and attunement to instrumental textures. Additionally, *Punisher* shows Bridgers crafting some of the most infectious melodies of her career, building on her stellar debut, work with boygenius, and collaborations with Conor Oberst.

3.



A.A. Williams – *Forever Blue*

One of the most nuanced vocalists of her generation, Williams seamlessly blends thanatoid pop with grungy textures and atmospheres. Navigating feelings of despair, loss, and heartbreak, Williams plunges a listener into darkly reflective realms, also offering ecstatic catharses, that sense of wholeness, however fleeting, that sublime art can facilitate.

4.

*Emma Ruth Rundle & Thou – May Our Chambers Be Full*

The heavily textured folk of Emma Ruth Rundle meets the sludgy, apocalyptic sonics of Thou. Exuding existential angst, the album also offers moments of darkly transcendent rapture – swirls of thunderous yet crystalline instrumentation, Rundle's ethereal voice commingled with Bryan Funck's hellish growl.

5.

*Good Bad Happy Sad – Shades*

Integrating grunge, noise templates, and avant-pop approaches, Good Sad Happy Bad revel in exhilarating rhythms and riffs, unshakable melodies, and adrenalized ambient flourishes. While the band's reference points are evident, their seamlessly rendered eclecticism makes for a transcendent and signature sound.

6.

*Taylor Swift – Folklore*

Folklore includes some of Swift's least ornamented and most ascetically crafted yet complexly evocative songs to date. Minimal but complementary production touches courtesy of Aaron Dessner give the album atmosphere and multidimensionality while never distracting from Swift's voice, hook-infused melodies, and accessible narratives.

7.

*Apollo Brown & Che' Noir – As God Intended*

Che' Noir balances perennial gangster-ism with melancholy reflections and historical interpretations, addressing themes related to childhood, lack of mentors, black/female oppression, and "making it" in the hardboiled world of hip-hop. Apollo Brown's adept treatments and laid-back sonics serve as the ideal complement.

8.

*Drab City – Good Songs For Bad People*

Dark electro-wizard Chris Dexter and producer/singer Asia forge a sultry, late-night, lo-fi, and deceptively eclectic debut. Songs are well-textured and melodic, carried by exquisite vocals, understatedly skillful instrumentation, and signature mixes. An exemplary commingling of dreampop, trip-hop, Glitch, and uber-Romantic sensibilities.

9.

*Creeper – Sex, Death & the Infinite Void*

Hard-rock/metal savvy meets a Broadway-esque narrative centered on an angel or vampiric figure who falls in love with a mortal. Add exemplary riffs and an impeccable sense of melody. Perhaps drawing from Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell*, at least conceptually, Creeper forges the


quintessential hybridization of goth, glam, and pop.

10.

 Nubya Garcia – *Source*


Mining traditional American templates as well as exotic beats and sparse electro-pop atmospheres, jazz saxophonist Nubya Garcia moves seamlessly from background takes to stunning experimental odysseys. Stellar supporting musicians include Joe Armon-Jones on piano and Wurlitzer, Sam Jones on drums, and Daniel Casimir on double bass.

11.

 Ondara – *Folk N' Roll, Vol 1: Tales of Isolation*


Featuring narratives that address our collective experiences with Covid-19/quarantine, including isolation, loss of income, and thwarted romance, Ondara's stripped-down approach features accessible lyricism, crystalline melodies, and Ondara's versatile voice (think a blend of Bob Dylan and Tracy Chapman).

12.

 Grand River – *Blink a Few Times to Clear Your Eyes*


Grand River, aka Aimée Portioli, offers complex ambient tracks and sequences, well-textured electronic beats, and dreamy melodic lines. A project alternately meditative and adrenalizing, hypnotic and galvanic, lo-fi and well-produced, *Blink a Few Times to Clear Your Eyes* nudges a listener beyond time and linearity, a project both ethereally transportive and existentially grounding.

13.

 Nadine Shah – *Kitchen Sink*

With a memorable voice that occasionally brings to mind Aldous Harding, and a sense of dynamics reminiscent of PJ Harvey, Nadine Shah melds grungy atmospheres, winning melodies, and incendiary commentaries to craft a riveting, occasionally disturbing, set, eleven tracks that integrate observation, protest, and portraiture.

14.

 Flaming Lips – *American Head*

Compared to the rest of the band's oeuvre, *American Head* is relatively un-experimental, featuring, instead, consistently hook-y melodies, accessible lyrics, and what may be Coyne's most nuanced vocal takes to date. A band that revels in psychedelic contexts, The Flaming Lips use their latest iteration to spotlight their often underrated songwriting craft.

15.

☒ Drive-By Truckers – *The Unraveling / The New OK*

Released in January and October, respectively, *The Unraveling* and *The New OK* occur as a diptych of sorts, a veteran band's display of impeccable songcraft and bold commentary on American life – an unbridled exploration of current political tensions and economic crises, as well as the ever-changing dynamics of society.

16.

☒ Lanterns on the Lake – *Spook the Herd*

On their latest, the British quintet continues to mine, reconfigure, and claim as their own the best elements of Broadcast, Stereolab, and Tunng, moving between well-textured dreampop, avant-pop, and beat-driven/synth-y soundscapes, melodies consistently hook-infused.

17.

☒ Boldy James & the Alchemist – *The Price of Tea in China*

Laid-back grooves blended with gangster-ish narratives reminiscent of west-coast 90's stylistics. The Alchemist facilitates languid accents, tremulous melodic lines, and lo-fi beats. Guest features, particularly by Vince Staples and Freddie Gibbs, add depth and energy to the project.

18.

☒ Frazey Ford – *U Kin B the Sun*

It's slightly annoying that Frazey Ford's lyrics are frequently indecipherable. That said, her voice and melodies are so uniquely compelling that her verbal content almost seems incidental. She's one of those singers who could sing stats from an actuary table, and I'd still be on board. Additionally, the musicians who accompany her draw seamlessly from folk, country, and R&B.

19.

☒ Jyoti – *Mama, You Can Bet!*

Mama, You Can Bet! highlights Muldrow's encyclopedic knowledge of jazz, hip-hop, funk, R&B, and soul, making for a stylistically diverse yet eminently integrated album. With *Mama, You Can Bet!*, Muldrow showcases her consummate talents, affirming herself as one of the stellar jazz and jazz-related musicians and composers of her generation.

20.

☒ Yves Tumor – *Heaven to a Tortured Mind*

Blending the tones and beats of Prince and D'Angelo with the experimentalism of Ariel Pink,

Yves Tumor successfully reconfigures his sources, offering a sequence grounded in familiar but imaginatively updated and compellingly modish templates.

21.



Jaki Shelton Green – *The River Speaks of Thirst*

The word-scape for the Social Revolution of 2020, North Carolina Poet Laureate Jaki Shelton Green's *The River Speaks of Thirst* features vivid poetry and palpable activism bolstered by minimal but integral instrumentation.

22.



Cable Ties – *Far Enough*

This talented Australian trio offers punk for a new age: infectious jams, torqued vocal deliveries courtesy of Jenny McKechnie, and lyrics that eloquently and viscerally address such ineluctable issues as climate change and the lingering prevalence of patriarchal norms.

23.



Rina Sawayama – *Sawayama*

Rina Sawayama's debut re-enlivens elements of 90's nu/alt-metal and early 2000's bubblegum pop. Additionally, Sawayama revels in her potent talent for melody, displays a fem-swagger courtesy of hip-hop, and is chicly attuned to heated political and social issues.

24.



Fiona Apple – *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*

Apple's lyrics are poetic, diaristic, and philosophic, her melodies inviting, her soundscapes inspired. As with previous albums, Apple's perspective alternates between and sometimes interweaves the misanthropic and idealistic.

25.



Midwife – *Forever*

Honing the dark minimalism of her previous sets, singer and multi-instrumentalist Madeline Johnston offers a set of compellingly paradoxical tracks, at once heavy *and* gossamer, earthy *and*

ethereal, somber *and* celestial.

26.



Plants and Animals – *The Jungle*

As with previous releases, the band draws from recognizable precedents and playbooks; *The Jungle*'s reconfigurations, however, are the band's most consistently sublime and seem to have been rendered effortlessly in comparison to earlier work. With *The Jungle*, Plants and Animals claim a more definitive and cogent sense of identity, maximizing a talent for both interpretation and invention.

27.



The Mystery Plan – *Zsa Zsa*

While *Zsa Zsa* offers a plethora of enticing sounds and melodies, it may in fact hold greater intrigue for those who approach music historically, referencing and reconfiguring, as it does, an array of approaches and styles. One of the more eclectic yet cohesive albums of the year, the band balances minimalism and complexity, pop and experimentalism, derivation and originality.

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