

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Stellar Albums of 2020 (So Far)

John Amen · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

2020 has been a tumultuous year, filled with challenges and possibilities for much-needed change. The music released between January and June has served as a soundtrack for the social upheavals we're witnessing as well as the dark and lingering shadow of Covid-19. Timeless Americana. Seamless blends of poetry, music, and activism. Resourceful reconfigurations of perennial templates. The list below highlights sixteen of this year's most compelling releases so far.

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The Soft Pink Truth – *Shall We Go on Sinning So That Grace May Increase?*

Using a mix of piano parts and electronically generated beats, Drew Daniel forges soundscapes heavy on fragmentation, the audial analogue to a shattered kaleidoscope impressionistically reassembled.

[divider]15[/divider]Aram Bajakian & Alan Semerdjian – *The Serpent and the Crane*

Blending poetry from Semerdjian and other Armenian writers with alternately sparse and layered sonics from Bajakian, this evocative set addresses – directly and obliquely – the Armenian Genocide and its historical marginalization over the past century.

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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. [Read full review](#)

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Mystery Plan – *Zsa Zsa*

The Mystery Plan's latest album moves seamlessly from space rock to melodic pop to elegant trip hop. One of 2020's more eclectic projects, including three distinct lead vocalists, the album

achieves a memorably impressive cohesion. [Read full review](#)

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Thundercat – *It Is What It Is*

The latest iteration from Stephen Lee Bruner is an audial adventure, replete with jazzy riffs, funky rhythms, space-rock textures, and lyrics that lean toward the metaphysical.

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Cable Ties – *Far Enough*

This talented trio offers punk for a new age: infectious jams, torqued vocal deliveries, and lyrics that address such ineluctable issues as climate change and the lingering prevalence of patriarchal norms. [Read full review](#)

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Soccer Mommy – *Color Theory*

Part of a wave of artists with “thanatoid” leanings, including Snail Mail, Julien Baker, and Phoebe Bridgers, Sophia Allison offers her brand of pop-based and darkly confessional songsmithery, a mix of Taylor Swift and Sylvia Plath. [Read full review](#)

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Jaki Shelton Green – *The River Speaks of Thirst*

The word-scape for the Social Revolution of 2020, *The River Speaks of Thirst* features vivid poetry and palpable activism bolstered by minimal but integral instrumentation. [Read full review](#)

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Tony Allen and Hugh Maskela – *Rejoice*

Tony Allen shares his percussive repertoire, including etheric accents and grounded rhythms. Maskela on trumpet, alternately celebratory and mournful, moves between intriguing improvisations and mantra-like riffs. An exemplary blend of Afrobeat and modern jazz.

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Lanterns on the Lake – *Spook the Herd*

On their latest, the British quintet continues to mine and reconfigure the best of Broadcast, Stereolab, and Tunng, moving between well-textured dream pop and beat-driven/synth-y soundscapes, melodies consistently sirenic.

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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. [Read full review](#)

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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 templates.

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Lucinda Williams – *Good Souls Better Angels*

Williams' latest shows the veteran singer-songwriter at her least inhibited, offering unbridled political and social commentary. Her vocals are as world-weary and uniquely evocative as ever, a mix of confessionalism and bold proclamations re the US's scarily nationalistic turn.

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Phoebe Bridgers – *Punisher*

Bridgers' second album illustrates the young singer-songwriter's broadening vocal skills, lyrical precision, and attunement to instrumental textures. Her new melodies – as on her debut, her work with boygenius, and her collaborations with Conor Oberst – are impeccably crafted.

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

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

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Waxahatchee – *Saint Cloud*

Katie Crutchfield's latest combines folk-rock beats and textures, irresistible melodies, and top-tier lyricism, resulting in the best album of the singer-songwriter's career and the most enchanting set of 2020 (so far).

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