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THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2019 (AND ONE FROM 2018)

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2019 (AND 2018 AND SOME FOR 2020)

Where are the protest songs, you say? Why aren't more artists releasing them in these tumultuous times? Well maybe they aren't releasing them in *your* language. This year I've listened to psychedelic rock songs by Umut Adan of Turkey, who protests that country's fascist-adjacent government. I've watched videos of brave men, women and children repurposing the show tune "Do You Hear The People Sing" from *Les Miserables* -- they've sung it at school events and when marching in the streets of Hong Kong and China. Not a new song, but still...how awesome is that? (So you might want to delete that cast album from your phone if you're visiting Shanghai on business.)

Best of all, the song of the summer in Puerto Rico was "Afilando Los Cuchillos" (aka "Sharpening The Knives"), a caustic tune mocking the incompetent and offensive Governor of Puerto Rico. It was created by Residente, Bad Bunny and iLe. Like most protest songs, it probably won't reverberate a decade from now. But mass protests set to a thumping beat and with the prominent support of artists like them sent the governor and his wife packing. Now THAT'S an effective protest song.

Bad Bunny delivered one of my favorite albums of the year...but it came out in December of 2018, so I'll be moving it to that year's list after touting it here. His new album just dropped and it's pretty great right out of the gate. And that brings me to iLe and the best albums of 2019. First, the albums, then a breakdown of each album and why it caught my ear. And here's a link to my favorite albums of all time, year by year.

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2019

iLe -- *Almadura*
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Nostalgique Porto Rico (Puerto Rican Roots 1940-1960)*
BAD BUNNY -- *X100PRE* (out Dec 2018)
BAD BUNNY AND J BALVIN -- *Oasis*
LIZZO -- *Cuz I Love You*
ARI LENNOX -- *Shea Butter Baby*
BRANFORD MARSALIS -- *The Secret Between the Shadow and the Soul*
SOLANGE -- *When I Get Home*
NICK CAVE -- *Ghosteen*
ANDY BURROWS AND MATT HAIG -- *Reasons To Stay Alive*
DORI FREEMAN -- *Every Little Star*
TINARIWEN -- *Amadjar*
MDOU MOCTAR -- *Ileana (The Creator)*
WEYES BLOOD -- *Titanic Rising*
JULIA JACKLIN -- *Crushing*
KEVIN MORBY -- *Oh My God*
JOHN LUTHER ADAMS -- *Become Desert*
ANDREW NORMAN -- *Sustain*

TANYA TUCKER -- *While I'm Living*
JUDY COLLINS -- *Winter Stories (w Jonas Fjeld and Chatham County Line)*
MANSION HARLOTS -- *All Around A Fairground*
TYLER, THE CREATOR -- *IGOR*
CAROLINE SHAW -- *Orange*
DEREK BERMEL -- *Migrations*
STURGILL SIMPSON -- *Sound & Fury*
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Once Upon A Time...In Hollywood*
MARIACHI LOS CAMPEROS -- *De Ayer Para Siempre*
THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH -- *I Love You. It's A Fever Dream*
BILLIE EILISH -- *When We All Fall Asleep*
VAMPIRE WEEKEND -- *Father Of The Bride*
LAKOU MIZIK -- *HaitiNola*
CHRISTIAN SCOTT ATUNDE ADJUAH -- *Ancestral Blues*

ANGELIQUE KIDJO -- *Celia*
NEIL YOUNG -- *Colorado*
FRANK TURNER -- *No Man's Land*
STILE ANTICO -- *In A Strange Land: Elizabethan Composers in Exile*
BECK -- *Hyperspace*
MICHAEL KIWANUKA -- *Kiwanuka*
ALLISON MOORER -- *Blood*
DAVE MALLOY --- *Octet (Original Cast Recording)*
THE GARIFUNA COLLECTIVE -- *Aban*
WILCO -- *Ode To Joy*
JOE JACKSON -- *Fool*
JEFF LYNNE'S ELO -- *From Out Of Nowhere*
PAUL KELLY -- *Songs From The South: Paul Kelly's Greatest Hits 1985-2019*
LOS LOBOS -- *Llegó Navidad*
STILE ANTICO -- *A Spanish Nativity*
ROBBIE WILLIAMS -- *The Christmas Present*

EARLY FAVORITES FOR 2020

BAD BUNNY -- *YHLQMDLG*
BRANDY CLARK -- *Your Life Is A Record*
TEDDY THOMPSON -- *Heartbreaker Please* (out in May)
MARIA MCKEE -- *La Vita Nuova*
MOSES SUMNEY -- *græ, Part 1*
THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *Quickies* (out in May)
GREEN DAY -- *Father Of All Motherfuckers*

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2019 -- THE BREAKDOWN

iLe -- *Almadura*
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Nostalgique Porto Rico (Puerto Rican Roots 1940-1960)* -- iLe is short for Ileana Mercedes Cabra Joglar. She feels like both a new artist and a veteran at the same time. iLe was the female voice of Calle 13, alongside her step-brothers known as Residente and Visitante. She was so young at the time iLe's nickname was PG-13. As a solo act, she has just two albums: iLevitable, which won the Grammy for Best Latin Alternative Album and now *Almadura*. iLe turns 31 in April and that maturity shines through on this album. It's not the up-to-the-minute alternative rap or reggaeton or Latin trap or whatever you want to label the music of Bad Bunny and Residente. But it's certainly not "traditional" music either, a label as meaningless as world music or pop or any other you want to use. iLe showcases the great pianist Eddie Palmieri, uses the romantic form of the bolero to decry violence against women and sidesteps trendy sounds and gestures with ease. But *Almadura* indeed sounds exactly like an "Alternative Latin" Grammy-nominated album should: it recognizes the past, embraces the present and looks to the future in every way. iLe speaks up and out about injustice, discrimination, hopefulness, love and more with a captivating directness. She's too busy changing the world to get on a soapbox, so it's not a shock when she ends with love on "De Luna." Before she gets there, iLe vows to reclaim and defend her territory in "Contra Todo." Whether that territory is her body, her beloved Puerto Rico or the entire world is purposefully vague, but I'm going to play it safe and assume she will defend it all.

While grooving to iLe's righteous rhythms, I also dove into a compilation of the music her grandparents probably grooved to decades ago. *Nostalgique Puerto Rico (Puerto Rican Roots 1940-1960)* is one of those invaluable resources that can send you into a dozen different directions, discovering world class talents who are household names in "P FCKN R" (as Bad Bunny sings on his new album) but little known to the rest of us. It's fun catching up.

BAD BUNNY -- *X100PRE*
BAD BUNNY AND J BALVIN -- *Oasis* -- Ok, I had a lot of Bad Bunny to catch up on. While iLe's music sounds like it would be at home on NPR or any cool college radio station, Bad Bunny should be blasting out of the biggest boom box or loudest car on the block. He's been guesting here there and everywhere until at the last minute of 2018 he dropped his debut. X100PRE is tight and utterly infectious. You can call it Latin trap or reggaeton or whatever you want, but to me it's pure pop of the best sort. How could anyone resist it? Even before ignorant folk like me need to drop the lyrics into Google Translate to decipher what he's singing about, the hilariously cool vibe of Bad Bunny comes shining through. And no one since James Brown has put so much style and sass into a monosyllabic grunt like BB. I've made an absolute fool of myself bobbing my head and grunting as I drive down the road jamming to X100PRE as well as his almost-as-good collaboration with fellow Latin star J. Balvin of Colombia. And Bad Bunny's new album just dropped. I Do What I Want aka Yo Hago Lo Que Me Da La Gana aka YHLQMDLG is just as ear-catching, body-moving, infectious-sounding as his first album.

LIZZO -- *Cuz I Love You*
ARI LENNOX -- *Shea Butter Baby* -- More protest music, people! I named iLe's album as the best of the year because I think it will age well and is more consistent. But no one offered higher highs or more good spirits for me than Lizzo. Her sheer good humor, smarts and no-nonsense directness is a protest against anyone who tries to insist she shouldn't love herself. And anyone else she wants and who would say no? The title track and opener "Cuz I Love You" establishes without a doubt that she can sing, full stop. Put that track last and it would seem a stunt; you'd think wow, why doesn't she sing like that all the time. Do it upfront and Lizzo's saying, "Don't put limits on me; I can do it all." And then she raps and sings and her remarkably funny line readings pop up and put a smile on your face. The lines are so quotable even I and my born-again white boy pal in upstate New York text each other "Why men great till they gotta be great?" and laugh ourselves silly. Heck, even the cover is a wonderfully in-your-face embrace of her big, beautiful self. The truth hurts and the truth is I wish she'd won the Grammy for Album of the Year. Even though Billie Eilish's bedsit music is deservedly on my list too, Lizzo felt more rebellious. I paired Lizzo and Ari Lennox even before I realized they toured together. Lennox is the first signing to J Cole's record label and she took her own sweet time releasing an EP in 2016 and this debut album in 2019. Unlike Lizzo's very modern vamping, Lennox strikes an old school pose here. Not the marvelous retro classic soul of Sharon Jones: Lennox comfortably quotes Motown/Philly *and* Erykah Badu on numerous tracks here. Cross Lizzo and you can imagine her saying, "What? WHAT??!!" whereas Lennox would cut you down with a simple stare. Neither one is to be messed with, but the mood here is definitely crazy sexy and cool.

BRANFORD MARSALIS -- *The Secret Between the Shadow and the Soul*
SOLANGE -- *When I Get Home* -- Critics pretend they're experts on everything, but really we just tell you what catches our ear. I've loved the brother Branford (versus Wynton; and yes, they're brothers so of COURSE there's competition) for many years. The Marsalis family clearly is leaving its mark on jazz but I've often idly wondered of W will be seen as a preserver and historian while the less lauded B will prove the bolder recording artist. My attention flits to jazz only occasionally, so what do I know? Well, I know I put on The Secret Between The Shadow and The Soul and immediately sat up straight. WTF? Is this that good? It sure as hell sounds that good. My God, that was an album, I thought, blissfully unaware if I was just in the right frame of mind or the rest of the jazz world felt the same. Come the end of 2019 and I kept seeing his album appearing on list after list after list of the best jazz albums of the year. So it wasn't just my own wayward opinion but the consensus of a lot of folk who listen to a lot more jazz than me. I don't mind touting some unknown quantity, but when it's a well known artist like Branford Marsalis, it's nice to realize everyone else agrees with me. The Secret Between The Shadow and the Soul is worth your time. So is Solange's new album, which flirted with the top spot for much of the year. It has a modestly jazzy vibe as Solange takes a sentimental journey to her hometown of Detroit and what it was, is and might have been. Her previous album A Seat At The Table is upfront protest music of the clearest, most undeniable sort. Here the Knowles sister who doesn't demand the spotlight again demurs being front and center as she turns her gaze on family and friends and memories and the world. It's a little gauzy and hard to pin down but equally hard to shake, like a daydream.

NICK CAVE -- *Ghosteen*
ANDY BURROWS AND MATT HAIG -- *Reasons To Stay Alive* -- Sometimes you just want to protest the pain of being alive. I've fallen in love with Nick Cave recently and I mean that literally. Not his music, but Nick Cave himself as a warm, thoughtful, kind and open-hearted human. It happened because of The Red Hand Files. Fans send in questions from the banal to the painful to the theological to the typical what's-that-song-about sort and Nick (I'm sure he'd say, "Call me Nick") answers them. You can subscribe to this newsletter and every once in a while (but not too often and not nearly often enough) an email will pop up with a fan's question and Nick's invariably funny, sweet, inspiring response. I've always admired his music and he's popped onto my lists over the years. But just as seeing someone live in concert can bond you to them like never before, this communication between Nick and his friends around the globe has bonded me to him. Now here's his new album, *Ghosteen*, an album whose songs are still reeling from the death of Nick's 15 year old son in 2015. It's painful to casually mention such an awful event, one that took place during the recording of his previous, also excellent album *Skeleton Key*. But it's not painful to listen to this sadly beautiful, resolutely hopeful album, one untethered by drums and percussion, resulting in music so slippery and wistful it can float away at times. I know people who can't bear films about sad stories or books that tackle sad events. But the very act of creating that art -- however much sadness it may express -- is an act of hopefulness, an act of inspiration, an act of love. How else can one go one? Andy Burrows and Matt Haig are also protesting, this time against despair and depression. Novelist Matt Haig lives with major depressive disorder and anxiety disorder, the subject of his memoir *Reasons To Stay Alive*. He and musician Andy Burrows befriended each other online and soon collaborated. Haig does the lyrics, Burrows does the music and the rest of us do what we can to stay alive, despite the awful tragedies that can befall or the health problems like depression that seem insurmountable and whose very purpose seems to be to tell us life is unendurable and why bother? Music like *Ghosteen* and *Reasons To Stay Alive* are why, the art that proves what a lie despair can be, the shared pain that can be so wonderful you'll stand in a crowd of thousands and just know the singer is singing your song and telling your story and you're not alone and never will be. Here's the kicker. The sound of Ghosteen is mournful but there's an undercurrent of joy. The sound of *Reasons To Stay Alive* is so AM radio-friendly I almost paired it with the new ELO album and yet it is threaded with glimpses of the abyss. Go figure.

DORI FREEMAN -- *Every Little Star* -- Deceptively simple and straightforward, the songs of Dori Freeman lodge in your brain and won't go away. She is ably supported by the sympathetic/empathetic talents of producer Teddy Thompson on this clutch of mature, thoughtful, open songs of adulthood. You play this country-ish, indie-ish, folk-ish, pop-ish music and think, "Nice." Then you play it again and think, "Very nice." Then you play it again and again and every element feels so right you can't imagine it any other way.

TINARIWEN -- *Amadjar*
MDOU MOCTAR -- *Ileana (The Creator)* -- Sometimes you just want to rock out. Usually, one turns to American rock gods for that sort of thing. This year I headed to the Sahara Desert where the marvelous group Tinariwen appears out of the desert like Laurence of Arabia to save the day. I dream of sitting by a fire in the middle of a pitch black night in the middle of nowhere (to me, but home to them) and hearing this music in person. For now, I'll have to settle for yet another excellent album of world music, by which I mean rock music that should conquer the world. Also rocking out is the fellow Tuareg artist Mdou Moctar. Just crank it up and enjoy.

WEYES BLOOD -- *Titanic Rising*
JULIA JACKLIN -- *Crushing*
KEVIN MORBY -- *Oh My God* -- Three young talents to get very excited about. Weyes Blood is Natalie Laura Mering and she's got a 70s vibe, some wonderfully eccentric combo of layered vocals a la The Carpenters along with pop arrangements worthy of Todd Rundgren or Burt Bacharach or somebody. Let's face it, she's unique and even has the good historic sense to end an album called *Titanic Rising* with a song called "Nearer To Thee." Julia Jacklin is an Aussie with somewhat of an indie/folk/country vibe. But I'll latch on to the fact that her new album was produced by Burke Reid of Courtney Barnett fame to intrigue you. And Kevin Morby is a piano-based wonder, a spiritual godchild of Randy Newman and Lindsey Buckingham who won me over right from the start with the opening title track "Oh My God," which I can't stop playing. It has three movements in just about four minutes, transitioning from a simple melody and arresting vocals to mix in a choir of background voices and then somehow a sax solo finale that has the gorgeous glow of Lou Reed's "Walk On The Wild Side" outro. Indeed, the obvious namechecks for his vocal style and lyrics are Reed and Bob Dylan, so don't ask me why I also think of Newman and Buckingham. Maybe I just don't want to burden him with mentioning Dylan. Anyway, that sax dips in and out of the album and is a beautiful constant throughout. Put any of these albums on and they will grab you by the collar and demand your attention.

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS -- *Become Desert*
ANDREW NORMAN -- *Sustain* -- I find classical music daunting. Hey, when the music has a 400 year head start, there's a lot of catching up to do! I long to dive in, but imagine I'd have to abandon all other genres for a long, long time just to move beyond amateur status. Until I do, I try to stay on top of living composers. Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Cage, new operas and so on. I don't feel quite out of my depth there because hey, Mozart is a legend but Glass is the guy down the block playing with his ensemble and doing scores for horror films. Here are two new talents I feel comfortable tackling. For one thing, they seem to have as much in common with Brian Eno as with Shostakovich. Their music is not the typical symphonic work (Da-Da-Da-DUM!) but ambient as all get out. Neither one of them builds up like Beethoven's Fifth, for example. They just...appear, full formed but out of reach until you suddenly take in their form in its entirety and step back with pleasure. And Become Desert led me to Adams' Pulitzer Prize winner Become Ocean, which is even better.

TANYA TUCKER -- *While I'm Living* -- I've never given Tanya Tucker a lot of thought and certainly never thought of her as one of those country legends I needed to catch up with sometime. As a 13 year old, she enjoyed an out of nowhere hit with "Delta Dawn," a song already sung by Bette Midler and many others, including Helen Reddy (who followed up Tucker's recording with her own that went to #1.) Improbably, Tucker stuck around and enjoyed a pretty good career and hopefully never got too sick of singing that song again and again for the past 50 years. Still, I saw she had a new album coming out and it had a certain Van Lear Rose vibe, the look of a late career statement though I imagined Tucker was no Loretta Lynn. Still, thanks to streaming, if I listen to an album all it costs me is time. But boy, the first track "Mustang Ridge" is good. Her voice is rugged and sure a little ragged but like many singers who mature nicely, Tucker knows what the hell she's doing with her voice and makes every word count. "The Wheels Of Laredo" is good too; old-timey country (she's not playing catch up here) but the song is a gem and so is the third and the fourth and what the hell, has she written these songs? Is she more of a Loretta Lynn (that is, a great songwriter) than I'd heard? And the really good songs keep coming, until she sings the Carrie Underwood song "The House That Built Me," a tune so country you can't help but smile and I think, "Well, I'm pretty sure she didn't write that one" and on it goes right up to the killer final track "Bring My Flowers Now," which is just about as great a song an aging singer could ask for. When it's over, I scramble to find out the deal. And there's Brandi Carlisle, the terrific singer who delivered one of the best albums of 2018. Apparently, she followed that up with this labor of love which Carlisle produced with Shooter Jennings, not to mention co-writing most of the songs. And what do you know, Tucker co-wrote exactly one tune, but it's a doozy, that album closer. What a treat.

JUDY COLLINS -- *Winter Stories (w Jonas Fjeld and Chatham County Line)* -- I've known about Judy Collins for many years of course and thought I had her pegged. Pretty but dull voice. Great taste in songs. Pain in the neck interview. (My friend said it was the worst interview they ever did.) I dipped into some of her breakout early albums and while I appreciated the boost she gave to so many talented acts, I never for a moment preferred her versions to theirs. Admirable, but not for me. Still, I have a weakness for Christmas music and mistakenly thought that's what I had here. Nope, but this wintry themed album made in concert with Chatham County Line and Jonas Fjeld caught me unawares. Collins obviously doesn't have the ringing beauty of a voice she had so many years ago when leading the world to the joy of Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and the like. But just like Tanya Tucker, Collins knows exactly what she's doing with it. She still has great taste in songs and now it's married to a wisdom and that values lyrical insight over surface prettiness. I kept playing this on, not quite trusting myself but it stuck with me. Reading up on her, it seems many feel Collins is enjoying a late career renaissance a la Cohen and Cash, so I've got some happy catching up to do.

Ok, I done ran out of time long ago. Let's get a little punchier in the comments, Michael.

MANSION HARLOTS -- *All Around A Fairground* -- My friend Sal at Burning Wood recommended this power pop treat and a treat it is.

TYLER, THE CREATOR -- *IGOR* -- Hey, after all that labeling, I'm down for a little sexual ambiguity again. And it's certainly better than Tyler's previous gay-baiting. Take a win where you can. This hip-hop album is thoughtful, catchy, playful and a little uncertain, not a quality usually present in hip-hop.

CAROLINE SHAW -- *Orange*
DEREK BERMEL -- *Migrations* -- More classical music. Shaw's "Orange" is a treat, with Attaca Quartet performing music she wrote over the past decade, from one-off pieces to the multi-part Plan & Elevation. It's so good I immediately jumped to her vocal effort "Partita For 8 Voices" and THAT led me to her work with Roomful of Teeth. Throughout she has a strong melodic presence that makes this pop lover feel at home. In contrast, Derek Bermel is all over the map -- it takes a jazz orchestra, a symphony and a singer to capture the many moods of the pieces on "Migrations." Just when you think you've got him pinned down (Copland-esque! Ellingtonia!), Bermel is off in another direction (Brazil??).

STURGILL SIMPSON -- *Sound & Fury* -- Ok, the anime companion piece threw me off. I keep thinking I should watch it, when this album stands on its own perfectly well. Yet I feel I'm missing the story so I hold off. And yet, when I do listen to it, the music is strong. Not quite as strong as "A Sailor..." which wasn't quite as strong as "Meta-Modern Sounds" but I don't think it's a trend. Sturgill is in it for the long haul.

VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Once Upon A Time...In Hollywood* -- Everything a well-compiled soundtrack should be. Whatever one thinks of Tarantino as a director (he's pretty great, if not everyone's cup of tea), he's got great taste in music. The radio deejay patter, the random ads, the selections ranging from nicely obscure to spot-on create a sense of time and place as convincing as the production design and costumes in his well-made film. Plus it plays great on its own, movie or no movie.

MARIACHI LOS CAMPEROS -- *De Ayer Para Siempre* -- I do miss Linda Ronstadt, one of the great restless voices in pop. She did it all and she did it well. One of the great groups she paired with is still at it, so anyone who savored her excellent mariachi albums should dive right in.

THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH -- *I Love You. It's A Fever Dream*
BILLIE EILISH -- *When We All Fall Asleep*
VAMPIRE WEEKEND -- *Father Of The Bride* -- One new friend and two older ones. The Tallest Man on Earth and Vampire Weekend deliver the goods. Tallest always maintains high standards while for me, Vampire Weekend keeps getting better and better. I did NOT expect that from the collegiate band who cribbed their entire debut album from Paul Simon's *Graceland*! No cheating! They're both in fine form. I can't deny the appeal of newcomer Billie Eilish, though her Grammy win for Album of the Year felt like a make-good for ignoring Lorde, it's still a solid choice. I'll want her to do it again before I start to go crazy and this isn't quite as distinctive as Lorde's debut. But it's very good, very aware of what she wants to do and does it well. Plus, that Bond theme song is the perfect riposte to Adele's Bond masterpiece, so one more point in her favor.

LAKOU MIZIK -- *HaitiNola*
CHRISTIAN SCOTT ATUNDE ADJUAH -- *Ancestral Blues* -- I mentioned my friend Sal, right? He provides great recommendations via his blog Burning Wood all the time. Plus he knows more about most music and especially New Orleans music than I ever will. So I sheepishly mentioned a New Orleans-centric album (assuming he'd already heard it, if not written the liner notes for it and attended the recording session) only to discover HaitiNola was news to him. It has a lot of stalwarts of the Crescent City and is a treat. So is Christian Scott Atunde Adjuah's out-there new album *Ancestral Blues*. Like Kamasi Washington and a host of others, Adjuah is breathing new life into jazz like nothing since Miles Davis whipped up his *Bitches Brew* in the 1970s. I could do without the brief rap passage, but when someone is going out on a limb, what do you expect? Playing it safe? Nope. Almost entirely successful? Absolutely.

ANGELIQUE KIDJO -- *Celia* -- Kidjo enjoyed a remarkable feat with her last album, a cover of the Talking Heads masterpiece *Remain In Light* that celebrated that album AND was brilliant in its own right. Now here she is again celebrating the great Celia Cruz. It's not quite as left field as the Talking Heads album, but it's great fun.

NEIL YOUNG -- *Colorado* -- Old Testament prophets do NOT predict the future or offer unexpected and inspiring insights. They look around, see what anyone with eyes and a brain and a heart can see and then -- this is what sets them apart -- they speak about it, loudly and repeatedly. They are pains in the ass and they won't shut up. Neil Young is an Old Testament prophet, decrying our treatment of the earth and each other with tuneful, beautiful, angry, harsh and inspiring music for decades now. We're destroying the planet! We're treating family farmers like dirt! The sound quality of MP3s SUCKS! And then he says it all again. And again. God bless him. *Colorado* is not as repetitive and tiresome as *Greendale*. It may not stand with his best (usually his albums grow on me and this one hasn't), but I'm not about to stop listening to him. It helps I did a deep dive into his 1970s catalog which is essentially one great album after another, just like Joni Mitchell.

FRANK TURNER -- *No Man's Land* -- I keep listening to Frank Turner, a Brit who wowed me with *Eight Track Heart* (great title!) but hasn't quite put it together since. He does here, marvelously so, with an album whose every track celebrates great women throughout history. For those still weeping over Elizabeth Warren's collapsed campaign or anyone, really, who believes in a guy and a guitar and a clutch of good tunes.

STILE ANTICO -- *In A Strange Land: Elizabethan Composers in Exile* -- I'm a little tired of groups pandering to audiences, delivering a tired compilation of Cole Porter tunes or songs about cars. Do we REALLY need yet another album devoted to Elizabethan composers who were exiled or at least felt exiled for their Catholic beliefs? Haven't we seen this a hundred times before? Ok, not really. The a cappella group Stile Antico comes in the wake of Anonymous 4 and Tallis Scholars and other classical vocal groups celebrating Renaissance vocal music. Their unique tactic is to make creative decisions as a group, rather than being guided by a conductor. Experts will know better than I how this influences their choices and repertoire and so on. All I know is that I listen to precious little Renaissance a cappella music, but it's lovely and inspiring when I do, much like Ladysmith Black Mambazo and others carrying on the tradition of vocal music today. And while the addition of a Shakespearean piece is cheeky (it's questionable whether the Bard was Catholic), the album as a whole is quietly moving.

BECK -- *Hyperspace*
MICHAEL KIWANUKA -- *Kiwanuka*
ALLISON MOORER -- *Blood* -- It's been a while since Beck has held my attention with an actual pop album, as opposed to his mellow side. He does that here and it's nice to hear. Kiwanuka is a new talent who delivers a soulful, acoustic debut that's good enough to let me hope he'll be even better in the future. Consider this mention an early investment in his career. And Allison Moorer has paid her dues. Unlike Beck, she never quite won me over before, not even on her duets album with sister Shelby Lynne. But it all comes together on Blood, stirringly so. So a veteran talent coming to new life, a new-comer who may be the start of something good and a journey-woman finally delivering after a career of trying.

DAVE MALLOY --- *Octet (Original Cast Recording)* -- This cast album is for the a cappella Off Broadway show Octet, from the creator of Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812. Malloy undoubted has talent but his most popular work hasn't aged well for me. Every time I saw it I was less impressed. But his Ghost Quartet collection of tunes remains firmly lodged in my brain. And here he tackles the internet with this all vocal project. To be honest, it had more impact performed in person than it does on tape. But the arrangements are clever, the tunes consistently engaging and the one or two weak pieces can be easily skipped.

THE GARIFUNA COLLECTIVE -- *Aban* -- The death of Belizean artist Andy Palacio was a huge setback for the Garifuna people and the music of theirs he celebrated. But the collective has continued since the glory days of their world-beating collaboration Watina. Dip into Aban and you'll be immediately won over. I sometimes feel like a tourist when it comes to music from other parts of the world. (One isn't supposed to say "world music" anymore.) Yet so what if I'm not deeply embedded into the music of other cultures and only dimly appreciate the traditions, the artists, the songs and what they draw upon in a culture? I go to Paris and love it without speaking the language. Why not visit this music and appreciate it on whatever level I can? I wouldn't regret a lifetime's devotion to bossa nova or the sitar, but the choice is not a major commitment or an inability to listen to it at all. I don't know much of anything about the Garifuna peoples but I know this music engages me and that can only be good.

WILCO -- *Ode To Joy*
JOE JACKSON -- *Fool*
JEFF LYNNE'S ELO -- *From Out Of Nowhere*
PAUL KELLY -- *Songs From The South: Paul Kelly's Greatest Hits 1985-2019* -- Four veterans delivering the goods. Wilco wakes up and delivers, as does the ever-caustic Joe Jackson. ELO's new album sounds EXACTLY like an album by ELO and by god, no one else can do that so enjoy it while Jeff Lynne still can. And Paul Kelly is a beloved fixture in Australia who never caught a break in the US. (His song "Dumb Things" threatened briefly to become a hit.) I'd compare him to the three Johns -- Mellencamp, Prine and Hiatt. He's got Prine's observational power, Mellencamp's social outlook and Hiatt's humor and everyman appeal. This is his third greatest hits set in the Songs From The South series and is perhaps a little overwhelming for newbies, what with 43 or so tracks. But the good to very good to great songs just keep on coming. Songs about great cricket players and tragic deaths and romance and bars. I came up for air at about track 30 and then decided I needed more. Very good stuff indeed.

LOS LOBOS -- *Llegó Navidad*
STILE ANTICO -- *A Spanish Nativity*
ROBBIE WILLIAMS -- *The Christmas Present* -- Ok, I love Christmas music. At one point, I owned hundreds of Christmas albums...and those were just the ones I kept. I make Christmas playlists. I dream of celebrating Christmas in July just so I can play Christmas music. When radio stations start playing nonstop Christmas music so soon after Halloween its shameful, I just smile. Me+Christmas music+happy. Here's the problem. Artists now keep up a constant stream of music so their fans don't forget them. In the age of streaming, they need product. So they don't stay quiet for two years while crafting a new album. They put out singles and EPs and live tracks and put songs on a soundtrack and on and on. Then two months later they panic because they need to put out something, anything. Recording music isn't the problem -- you can do it anywhere, anytime and it can sound great. But what to record? A-HA! A Christmas album! And they do. This year the amount of Christmas music released exploded by a factor of ten. I powered through so many Christmas albums I almost despaired of losing my joy; the 113th rendition (that week!) of "Winter Wonderland" can do that to you. You can listen to a dozen Christmas albums and find nothing. If an artist delivers one distinctive cover of a Christmas classic, that's a serious win. An entire album? One you want to play again and again? That doesn't happen much. Well, so MANY albums were released in 2019, I have three to tout. Los Lobos have the clear winner with Llego Navidad, an album celebrating Christmas with songs that ranged all over Central and South America. Mostly new to me, they're a treat to hear delivered with passion by one of the great rock bands around. (And how have I never seen them in concert?) I have a strong preference for secular tunes. Not only are the religious ones less interesting, they bring out the worst in singers. But the Renaissance specialists Stile Antico present Spanish songs that might stump even Los Lobos. Their album A Spanish Nativity presents songs from a mass interspersed with traditional tunes...and I'm talking traditional hundreds of years ago. Their sound is inherently hush-inducing and spiritual -- human voices raised in unison is always powerful. So when you're driving to midnight mass, A Spanish Nativity will be perfect. On the way home, you can blast out The Christmas Present by Robbie Williams. Like eggnog with a LOT of liquor in it, Williams overstuffs this double album. You could quibble and start editing it to create the perfect single album, but don't be a jerk. He's shown up at your door with an armful of presents and that wicked smirk of his. Williams does proud by some classic tunes but he also co-wrote a LOT of new songs and the quality level is very high indeed. It may take me a year or two to sort them out and by then a whole bunch of new Christmas albums will be out but isn't that the wonderful thing about Christmas music and music in general? All that music can be a little overwhelming at times, but my god you hear some great stuff if you take a little time. Enjoy!

EARLY FAVORITES FOR 2020

BAD BUNNY -- *YHLQMDLG*
BRANDY CLARK -- *Your Life Is A Record*
TEDDY THOMPSON -- *Heartbreaker Please* (out in May)
MOSES SUMNEY -- *græ, Part 1*
THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *Quickies* (out in May)
GREEN DAY -- *Father Of All Motherfuckers*

POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 11:00 AM

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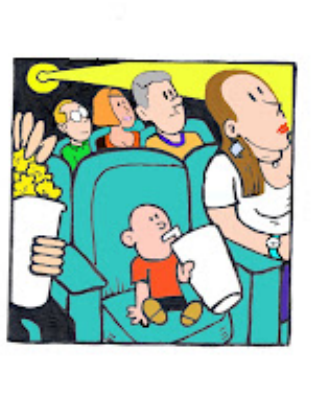
MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK



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Five O'Clock Lightning baseball blog
Deep Pop -- Lori Lakin's Blog
The Back Page -- Jason Page on ESPN Radio
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