



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 06, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

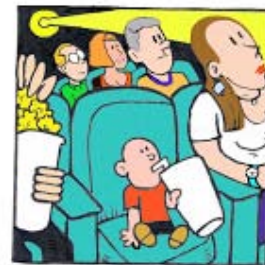
## Music: The Best Albums Of 2017 or How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Streaming

### THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2017 -- AN INTRODUCTION (FULL ESSAY AT THE BOTTOM)

If I'm honest, the albums I obsessed over the most in 2017 were by Doris Day and Dick Haymes. Thanks to a new book, I headed down a rabbit hole of great music from the glory days of pop singers like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. "The Great Jazz and Pop Vocal Albums" is a collection of essays by [Will Friedwald](#), each piece focusing on a different artist and album(s). Essentially, these are his Desert Island Discs and Friedwald (one of the great experts on jazz singers and other swingers) brings passion and enthusiasm to everything from classic albums by Sarah Vaughan and Sinatra (natch) to relative obscurities by Tiny Tim (!) and a Latin jazz piece by Della Reese....

And that brings me to the other sea change in my music-listening life: streaming. Along with the thousands of CDs, hundreds of cassettes, dozens of LPs and terabytes of digital audio I've compiled over the years, I now subscribe to Spotify. (Forgive me, artists! I campaign for higher royalty rates all the time.) While the service is woefully inadequate on contemporary jazz and world music, pathetic when it comes to the vast libraries of sound out there in many categories throughout history and lacking in a million other ways...it sure does offer a lot of music on tap, including pretty much anything remotely mainstream put out in the last few years....

So here's a chance to make good use of your favorite streaming service. If one of these albums sounds intriguing to you, it's never been easier for you to check it out. I'm not even bothering to include YouTube videos for key songs or links to artist websites anymore. If you don't have a streaming service, obviously you can indeed go to



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#### FAVORITE LINKS

[Americablog](#)

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[Deep Pop -- Lori Lakin's Blog](#)

[The Back Page -- Jason Page on ESPN Radio](#)

[Cine-Blog -- George Robinson's Blog](#)

[Documents On Art & Cinema - Daryl Chin's Blog](#)

[Brucie G's Wondrous Blog Of Adventure and Mystery -- Bruce Greenspan's Blog](#)

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#### BLOG ARCHIVE

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YouTube and check out key tracks from any of the acts mentioned. So here are my favorite albums of the year, followed by a breakdown of what excited me about each particular act. Enjoy!

[Read the full essay at the bottom.]

## THE (ROUGHLY) FIFTY BEST ALBUMS OF 2017

CÉCILE MCLORIN SALVANT -- *Dreams And Daggers*  
CHRIS STAPLETON -- *From A Room, Vol. 1*  
ORCHESTRA BAOBAB -- *Tribute To Ndiouga Dieng*  
SZA -- *Ctrl*  
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Hadestown Original Cast Album (Off Bway)*  
JOHN MORELAND -- *Big Bad Luv*  
THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *50 Song Memoir*  
SIA -- *Everyday is Christmas*  
THE JOHN SALLY RIDE -- *A New Set Of Downs*  
COURTNEY BARNETT AND KURT VILE -- *Lotta Sea Lice*

KASEY CHAMBERS -- *Dragonfly*  
BOB DYLAN -- *Triplicate*  
DANIEL CAESAR -- *Freudian*  
JASON ISBELL -- *The Nashville Sound*  
MARGO PRICE -- *All American Made*  
KENDRICK LAMAR -- *Damn*  
KRONOS QUARTET AND TRIO DA KALI -- *Ladilikan*  
STANTON MOORE -- *With You In Mind*  
AIMEE MANN -- *Mental Illness*  
JAKE XERXES FUSSELL -- *What In The Natural World*  
LORDE -- *Melodrama*  
DON BRYANT -- *Don't Give Up On Love*  
ROBERT CRAY AND HI RHYTHM -- *Robert Cray and Hi Rhythm*  
CURTIS HARDING -- *Face Your Fears*

CHARLY BLISS -- *Guppy*  
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Sunday in The Park With George (Bway 2017)*  
THE NATIONAL -- *Sleep Well Beast*  
MOSES SUMNEY -- *Aromanticism*  
SAMPHA -- *Process*  
WESLEY STACE'S JOHN WESLEY HARDING -- *Wesley Stace's John Wesley Harding*  
DORA FREEMAN -- *Letter Never Sent*  
ANNA TIVEL -- *Small Believer*  
KAMASI WASHINGTON -- *Harmony of Difference*  
CHEAP TRICK -- *We're All Alright!*  
SAZ'SIO -- *At Least Wave Your Handkerchief At Me*  
INDIA.ARIE -- *Songversation: Medicine*

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LARRY CAMPBELL AND TERESA WILLIAMS -- *Contraband Love*  
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LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO -- *Songs Of Peace and Love*

## **THE (ROUGHLY) FIFTY BEST ALBUMS OF 2017 -- IN DEPTH**

### **1-10**

CÉCILE MCLORIN SALVANT -- *Dreams And Daggers*

The most exciting jazz vocalist since Cassandra Wilson broke through with *Blue Light Till Dawn*, [my favorite album of 1993](#). Salvant won the Grammy for this double album and no wonder. But what exactly is she doing? She's not expanding the Great American Songbook the way Wilson did by embracing everything from the Monkees to Tom Waits. She's not pushing the envelope musically. She's not radically reinterpreting songs with some meta narrative or re-contextualization. And yet, she's doing all of this quietly, subtly, brilliantly. Salvant digs up some obscurities but they aren't presented as curios or quaint novelties, just good songs worth singing. She's got a terrific band, led by pianist Aaron Diehl. Her originals nestle comfortably alongside classics by Noel Coward and Irving Berlin. And her singing just...illuminates the songs without any muss or fuss. Somehow she can sing a number like "If A Girl Isn't Pretty" (which I'd never heard before) and do justice to the tune, earn the laughs it genuinely deserves (without winking at the audience) and yet also in some mysterious way get you thinking about its out-dated attitudes towards women. And yet it's also just a wonderful old tune performed with style. She effortlessly deconstructs it with the x-ray intelligence of her singing; look, ma -- no hands! (Salvant's mom was in the audience during these live performances, a fact she brought up right after a particularly risqué number.) Unlike Vaughan (who I shamefully have only just warmed up to, a little) Salvant never curlicues her singing, never indulges in showboating even if her voice could do so with ease.

A lesser singer would have a blast with the bluesy, sexy double (or triple) entendre that is "You've Got To Give Me Some." Salvant makes it sexier and funnier than anyone else by not underlining the jokes. With the restraint and lyrical focus of Blossom Dearie and the dynamics of Dinah Washington and the thoroughly modern sensibility of Wilson (this is no throwback chanteuse), Salvant just delivers. She embodies these 23 numbers like a cabaret performer and she swings these numbers like a jazz singer and she reinvigorates these standards like an artist.

CHRIS STAPLETON -- *From A Room, Vol. 1*

Is it the voice? God knows the gravelly, distinctive vocals of Chris Stapleton make you sit up straight in your seat the second they dig into a line. It has the comforting rasp of Bob Seger and the deep-bone authenticity of Willie Nelson and even when he's goofing off on a duet of "(I've Had) The Time Of My Life" with actor Chris Pratt during a late night talk show sketch, you just believe whatever he's saying. Heck, maybe they did have the time of their life. This is country or rock or country rock or Americana or whatever you wanna call it. Nine damn good songs and an excellent follow-up to his excellent debut "Traveller." He followed this up months later with "From A Room, Vol. 2" and that's a solid album too but he put his best foot forward right here. The guy just released his first album in 2015 but damned if he doesn't seem like a beloved veteran we've been listening to for years. That's pretty special.

ORCHESTRA BAOBAB -- *Tribute To Ndiouga Dieng*

New music from old friends. While they had a flood of music in their first heyday during the 1970s and early 1980s (probably on hard-to-find cassettes), Orchestra Baobab is known in the West for just a handful of beguiling releases. Their most famous album was recorded in 1982, released in 1989 after they broke up and became a sensation around the world when it was reissued by World Circuit records. I have to turn to the experts to tell you they combine Afro-Cuban rhythms with Griot culture and other strands of African music like the Mandinga music of the Casamance. (Hey, this is world music, after all.) Not to worry -- you won't have to consult anyone if you put on the album "Pirate's Choice." Your body will start swaying of its own accord with music that is as joyous as anything by Duke Ellington or Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. The band reformed and toured the world but instead of overwhelming us with music when international fame struck, they've produced just three more studio albums, all brilliant: "Specialist In All Styles" in 2002, "Made In Dakar" in 2007 and now a decade later this tribute to one of their original singers, Ndiouga Dieng. Fifty years on, the tradition continues with his son Alpha Dieng joining some of the original lineup on this album that looks backwards and forwards with disarming ease. Think Buena Vista Social Club.

SZA -- *Ctrl*

I worried the drama surrounding this debut album might prove far more interesting than the actual music. SZA is a talented songwriter with a passionate fanbase and she agonized over "Ctrl." It sucked! It wasn't worth releasing! She should just erase the whole damn thing and start all over again.! Not since the La's got all Hamlet over its first album has a debut act seemed so paralyzed by self-doubt. But that insecurity isn't a bug; it's a feature. SZA's songs charm with their second-guessing and their third-guessing and fourth-guessing until you're thoroughly won over by her self-aware teen girl anxieties (as on "Drew Barrymore") that aren't a sign of immaturity but the sign of a budding maturity. On the other hand, she also delivers an hilarious ode to the vagina called "Doves In The Wind" that is nutty and sexy and so awesome you can imagine Prince shaking his head in admiration and saying, "Damn!" Janet Jackson may have been the first woman to extol "Control," but SZA is doing it with fewer letters and more vulnerability and thus more strength. A very promising debut.

VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Hadestown Original Cast Album (Off Broadway)*

*Hadestown* is a musical adaptation of the myth about Orpheus and Eurydice. That's the story of a singer who follows his beloved down to the Underworld. The voice of Orpheus is so beautiful he actually wins the right to lead her back to freedom...as long as he doesn't turn around. This classic tale has been turned into a marvelous rock and roll song cycle that would have been perfect for Jeff Buckley. The story is also a stinging indictment of corporate capitalism run amuck, all wrapped up in an immersive show brimming over with talented actors, great songs by composer Anaïs Mitchell and a villain for the ages embodied with relish by Patrick Page. [It was one of my favorite shows of 2016](#) and I've been dying to see it again. Now, finally, they've released a live recording of the show from its Off Broadway run. Even better, they staged the show again in Canada last fall, figuring out a way to put this musical on a proscenium stage without the prohibitive cost of tearing a theater apart a la *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*. Listen to this cast album and you'll hear the best rock musical since oh, *Spring Awakening*?

JOHN MORELAND -- *Big Bad Luv*

Here's an Okie who started out in punk, moved towards rock and then went stone cold acoustic after he heard Steve Earle and saw the (folk) light. Hell, anyone who can have a conversion experience thanks to Steve Earle is ok in my book. Now Moreland has recorded with a full band for the first time. Apparently Rachel Maddow sang his praises. (Moreland amusingly said it was the first time his dad ever agreed with a single thing Maddow ever said.) And darned if she isn't right. Reading a review of the another-terrific-album variety, I said, "Wait, who is this guy? What have I missed?" and dove right in. About three

seconds after it was over, I played it again and three seconds after that I downloaded "In the Throes," which is more acoustic but just as satisfying and now I'm headed on to "High On Tulsa Heat." Think Steve Earle, because he does.

#### THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *50 Song Memoir*

True, it didn't garner quite the attention of the sprawling "69 Love Songs." But this opus by Stephen Merritt has a terrific hook: he recorded one song for every year he's been alive, from 1966 right up to 2016. Clever! Merritt has a seemingly effortless gift for quirky pop songs that sound like nothing and everything else, jumping through stylistic hoops that lead you from one genre to the next but always anchored by deeply funny and piercing lyrics. But hold on a second. Aren't we just wowed by the meta-concept of it all? Yes and so what. While I've loved some of Merritt's more conventional albums under Magnetic Fields and other monikers -- albums of the 12-or-so song variety; 35 minutes and then you're done -- the fact is that Merritt benefits from the epic approach. His eclectic tunes thrive in context. Some film directors need the discipline of 90 minutes while others can't be appreciated until the three hour mark has been left in the dust. So it is with Merritt. His hopscotch through pop history can sometimes feel forced and head-snapping on brief albums. But give him a few hours, let yourself be fully immersed in his world and the sheer variety of songs, the dazzling breadth of his musical landscape and the deadpan beauty of his lyrics develop their own giddy power. You need a dozen or so songs just to orient yourself to his sensibility and then you're off, giggling over hilarious song titles when you're not blindsided by his characters. Before you know it, Merritt-land doesn't feel quirky or disorienting but the most natural place in the world. He's also damn funny, but humor may be the least appreciated element in pop music so I'll leave you to discover that for yourself. Despairing and romantic and elegiac, usually all at the same time.

#### SIA -- *Everyday is Christmas*

Confession: I haven't really paid much attention to Sia before. I admired her gimmick of sort of not showing her face most of the time, even when performing or appearing on a talk show. She hid her face behind wigs that would give Cousin Itt pause and I thought, "That's cool." But somehow I thought this commentary on popularity and our need to fixate on appearances meant her music wasn't as important as her shtick. But I'm a huge sucker for Christmas music. (Really, I own more Christmas albums on CD than you can shake a candy cane at). So I'll sample pretty much *any* Christmas record, hoping to discover a decent cover of a classic tune or an original worthy of being added to my holiday playlists. If I find one good song on a new Christmas album, I'm happily surprised. The first track here is the slightly demented "Santa's Coming For Us," a pop gem that is technically straightforward but has an air of menace that makes you think of the Santa from "Silent Night, Deadly Night" more than jolly ol' Saint Nick.

But my god it's catchy. I played it again. And again. That's a terrific song, I thought. Then came "Candy Cane Lane," which Phil Spector would have given the thumbs up. And then "Snowman," which made me think of Kate Bush with its slightly loopy ode to a romance with a snowman and the transitory nature of love (especially when said love melts in the heat). "Snowflake" had a similar wistful vein and I thought maybe it wasn't the smartest song to follow a similar our-love-is-melting theme. But what the heck was going on? I was four songs in and I liked, even loved, *every single song*. "Puppies Are Forever," a warning to those who think puppies make great gifts, should be adopted by PETA, but from start to finish ("Underneath The Christmas Lights") I was delighted. Ten Christmas originals and while some are stone cold classics, they are *all* good to great. That just doesn't happen much when it comes to holiday albums. Clearly I need to go back and listen to Sia again for the first time. Think Phil Spector's "A Christmas Gift For You," but shinier and newer and all originals.

#### THE JOHN SALLY RIDE -- *A New Set Of Downs*

Power pop? Rock n roll? However you label it, this is music played by adults who remain driven by a need to create music long after their dreams of radio hits and incipient stardom have died and been buried and resurrected and killed again and zombie-fied to stagger around some more and dismissed again and yet lurks in the background even as they hit their 30s or 40s but who are they kidding? Think John Hiatt and "Bring The Family." An album that grabs the brass ring because they aren't trying to do anything but make the best damn music they can and please themselves. And it's funny! Looking back through my Top 10, I see a lot of music spiked with humor, from Salvant's dizzying jazz covers that have her live audience cracking up to the black humor of "Hadestown" to the nonstop wry wit of Magnetic Fields and just below this album the Mutt and Jeff routine of Barnett and Vile. You'll start smiling at the opening line "One of these days you'll have one of those days," a play on words that's not a joke but mines a vein of self-aware self-deprecation that is this album's sweet spot. It helps when the words are married to an arrangement that harkens back to Fountains of Wayne or Marshall Crenshaw and any number of power pop bands you want to namecheck. The tune "Your Closest Friends" nails the description of a close friend as the people "you never got around to telling 'take a hike!'" But by the time lyricist and singer John Dunbar is talking about "The Girl You Won't Leave Your Life For" or "I Could Really Disappoint You," you realize they're not delivering jokes but making you smile because they're nailing complex emotions you've experienced but never quite voiced, certainly not with a tight band and spot-on production to underline your insights. The band and Len Monachello do a great job with the production, segueing neatly between songs or adding in processed vocals that add just the right atmosphere without ever getting in the way of the melody. It's only on a careful fourth or fifth listen that you realize how much is quietly going on here. Dunbar shines with a string of solos on the guitar that flow effortlessly out of the tune at hand,

absolutely never calling undue attention to themselves even as they rock out. And he gets excellent support from the two Sals: Maida on bass that is needless to say the album's pulse and Nunziato's drumming, percussion and backing vocals that offer Ringo-like solidity with flourishes that (like Dunbar's guitar) add just the right touch with a minimum of fuss. They're too grown up to show off and too passionate to do less than everything they can in service of the songs. The finale "Forgetting That I Am Forgotten" should be the ironic finale to an album that garners critical acclaim. But if it becomes an epitaph for a super group of journeymen that didn't turn into Cream and rise to the top, well it's a proud one anyway.

COURTNEY BARNETT AND KURT VILE -- *Lotta Sea Lice*

OK, I'll admit I've been suspicious of Courtney Barnett, the hype and her particular style. The drawling, offhand singing felt too gimmicky to last. Surely we'd tire of her or decide she wasn't all-that after an album or two? Nope. Barnett's whip-smart lyrics and sui generis genre of one are proving more irresistible the more I hear them. And what sort of mind meld has she pulled with Kurt Vile? On this album where they trade vocals or duet, you'd swear Vile is channeling Barnett. Clearly he heard a kindred spirit the first time he heard her. Their back and forth sounds like that person you met in college and felt an immediate connection to because you had read the same books and seen the same movies and thought the same thoughts and finished each other's sentences while laughing with recognition. A bluesy, rocking, Dylanesque (but not Dylan-imitating) left-field delight, just like everything Barnett has done.

**11-24**

KASEY CHAMBERS -- *Dragonfly*

If you're Australian you're probably proud to see Kasey Chambers make a list halfway around the world but also wondering why she isn't in the top 10 or topping them all. Chambers is a superstar Down Under, performing since she was a kid in a traveling troupe with her family. I fell hard for two albums she recorded with her then-husband Shane Nicholson, rootsy stuff that felt like a modern spin on The Anthology Of American Folk Music. They split up and I soon realized her part in this duo was just a sliver of Chambers' wide-ranging career. It all comes together on this double album, one half a collaboration with Aussie legend Paul Kelly and the other half with her longtime producer (and brother) Nash Chambers. It covers the waterfront in terms of Americana (Australiana?), offering up everything from protest songs to country to country rock to a Woody Guthrie goof that talk-sings its way through a mini-bio of her life and pretty much wowing you every step of the way.

BOB DYLAN -- *Triplicate*



Yes, I'm the guy who is delighted by Dylan's string of albums where he goes all Sinatra on us. The man can do anything (including falling flat on his face) and this is further proof his risks usually pay off. Actually it's proof of his claim to a stake to all of popular music. The man who rebelled being labeled as just a folk singer, who wouldn't be bound by an acoustic guitar and a harmonica when there were instruments to plug in, a lyricist who could wrestle with faith and draw upon the Bible or Scottish ballads or murder songs for inspiration, a person who heard music of all sorts and drew upon it all -- blues, rock, jazz, gospel, country, Stephen Foster and Stephen Sondheim and yes folk -- well, why the hell wouldn't he tackle the Great American Songbook? No one blinked an eye when he delivered albums of standards, but that was because Dylan knew his place and sang old folk tunes and blues songs and ditties like "Froggy Went A' Courting." That was all well and good. But show tunes? The love song from "Casablanca?" Why would he croak his way through them? Because he can. Wisely, Dylan avoids strings and classic pop arrangements. He uses a rock band to anchor these tunes and make his case that a song is a song -- it's all music and he can do it all. The proof is that I can jump in anywhere on this three CD set of 30 songs and be immediately struck by the arrangements, the cracked and bruised voice that is a shadow of its former self but which he deploys with more insight and wisdom than ever and most of all by the songs.

DANIEL CAESAR -- *Freudian*

Dear lord, I'm never going to finish this list! Believe me, I could wax enthusiastic about every one of these albums, but let me just give you an idea of what you'll be sampling if you sample these. In Caesar's sexy smart case, it's state of the art rhythm and blues. Like many acts in that genre, he stands in the shadow of Marvin Gaye. But this isn't "Let's Get It On." Caesar proves even more appealing by wanting a committed, meaningful relationship. What could be sexier than a man who acknowledges his frailties, his flaws? From "Get You" to "Blessed," this is an especially mature, grown-up album of love songs. And the guy is only 22 years old? A terrific debut.

JASON ISBELL -- *The Nashville Sound*

MARGO PRICE -- *All American Made*

KENDRICK LAMAR -- *Damn*

Righteous rock. Committed country. Political pop. Whenever I'm going crazy over headlines and the latest outrage, it's great to put on Margo Price's "All American Made" and Jason Isbell's "The Nashville Sound" and know people are paying attention, documenting lives, speaking up -- and kicking ass musically while doing it. Who says no one is writing good protest music? It's everywhere from Isbell's fiery call to arms to Price's stories from the heartland to Lamar's more wide-ranging critique of modern society. It took me a while to warm up to Lamar's acclaimed album. At first all I heard were his complaints about the burden of celebrity. I thought he'd been too burdened by fame and the

need to deliver a Very Important Album to deliver a good one. But taking a break and letting it sneak up on me and giving it a second and third and fourth chance proved the followup to "Butterfly" (which wowed me right off the bat) has a sinewy strength. It didn't hurt to see him knock it out of the park at the Grammys.

KRONOS QUARTET AND TRIO DA KALI -- *Ladilikan*

I used to be bothered by the ideas of acts that became "brand names," a moniker used by an ever-changing roster of musicians decades after some (or all) of the original members were gone. But that's been done in the classical world for a long time and if they maintain standards or mutate into something new but just as worthy, who the heck cares? Kronos Quartet has featured three of its four members for 40 years now, but I won't be surprised if it continues for another forty. Their main legacy will surely be commissioning new music by countless composers and unique collaborations. Truly, Kronos is so prolific I sometimes lose track of their work. But here they partnered with griot musicians from Mali and the result is just...lovely.

STANTON MOORE -- *With You In Mind*

An all-star album of New Orleans jazz that doesn't feel like one of those dutiful all-star events but a late night jam that we've stumbled on, the sort of unforgettable night where you walk into a bar and say, hey is that...? And is that...??!! Contains the 37th cover this year of "Southern Nights" and you got a problem with that? As Joni Mitchell snapped at a reporter who complained that every Christmas album contained a cover of her classic song "River" -- "It's called a standard! That used to be considered a good thing."

AIMEE MANN -- *Mental Illness*

A treat from one of pop/rock's most reliable talents. Like Ron Sexsmith, she's perennially taken for granted. Somehow, this won the Grammy for Best Folk Album? Folk? Well, whatever, but she sure as hell deserved the trophy.

JAKE XERXES FUSSELL -- *What In The Natural World*

Nope I've never heard of him either but this came courtesy of William Tyler, who produced and who I know as a purveyor of spaced out instrumental pop (think Jimmie Dale Gilmore sans vocals -- lots of wide open spaces). Fussell has gorgeous guitar work, sharp lyrics, an adult's perspective on life and Tyler knows how to open the windows and doors and let the music breathe. Now I've got to scramble back and listen to his debut.

LORDE -- *Melodrama*

She was robbed! Heck, Lorde should have at least performed at the

Grammys since she gives magnetic performances every time I see her on TV. (No small feat.) Damned if this isn't the dreaded second album that hints at the burden of fame while really delving into the burden of life (for a twenty year old) and yet somehow doesn't seem tiresome about any of it. She's here for the long haul.

DON BRYANT -- *Don't Give Up On Love*

ROBERT CRAY AND HI RHYTHM -- *Robert Cray and Hi Rhythm*

CURTIS HARDING -- *Face Your Fears*

Three soul albums to give you strength: a comeback from a guy who never came, a revival for a bluesman who never went away (but got a little boring) and a young turk who shows he's been paying attention. Bryant is the veteran and he's paired with musicians from the heyday of Al Green and Hi Records, namely the famed Hi Rhythm section and some of the Bo-Keys for good measure. It's not a last lap or a nostalgic tip of the hat, but a full-on success story. The Hi Rhythm guys have been busy: they paired with Robert Cray and their tightness slapped him around a little and proved Cray (known for polite vocals and stinging guitar) to prove his singing could get a little down in the mud, too. It's his best album in ages. The sloppy funky soul of Curtis Harding is old school enough without being remotely retro. Good, good stuff.

## **25-36**

CHARLY BLISS -- *Guppy*

Punk-pop that glories in teen and young adulthood obsessions with blissful indiscretion.

VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Sunday in The Park With George* (Bway 2017)

As much a memento from a glorious night of theater as an album in its own right. But boy did Jake Gyllenhaal blow me away and Sondheim's ode to the artistic process remains mystifyingly moving to me. Why is *this* the show that should move me so deeply every time I see it? In all honesty, I don't play the cast album(s) much because I worry about thinning out its impact. Marvelous in its own right but I'd be happy to give it up forever if I could see this production just one more time.

THE NATIONAL -- *Sleep Well Beast*

Seeing them live at the Brooklyn Academy Of Music has kept me linked to The National for years, even as album after album proved merely good -- and not great as their early magnetism promised. Here again, for some reason, the bleak paranoia and unease strikes the right balance and lets them glimpse the mountaintop again if only for a moment.

MOSES SUMNEY -- *Aromanticism*

SAMPHA -- *Process*

Last year it was the women (Laura Mvula, Esperanza Spadling, Corinne Bailey Rae) who seemed to launch into space with their wigged-out, delirious spin on r and b and pop. This year it's the men who sound like the love children of Marvin Gaye at his dreamiest married to Sun Ra's celestial musings. Sumney hits his falsetto and rarely misses while Sampha wrestles with his conscience and the world and it all delights.

WESLEY STACE'S JOHN WESLEY HARDING -- *Wesley Stace's John Wesley Harding*

The Jayhawks are proving a secret weapon when it comes to collaborations. Certainly they do exceptional work here with Wesley Stace aka John Wesley Harding aka an act I've never appreciated as much as I do here. Shedding his alter ego (or at least taking his place beside it) and letting the Jayhawks push him into more bracing territory proves a happily combustible mix.

DORA FREEMAN -- *Letter Never Sent*

ANNA TIVEL -- *Small Believer*

Two acts coming from different sides of folk-pop/country. Dora Freeman is deceptively subtle, produced to perfection by Teddy Thompson on a collection of songs that builds on her grow-on-you debut. Tivel comes from the rockier side of life and isn't taking any guff from anyone as she details the world as it's lived in by a woman with a guitar and Gram Parson's eye for the telling detail. Spend some time with the albums and they'll sneak up on you.

KAMASI WASHINGTON -- *Harmony of Difference*

Streaming services sure have their weaknesses and jazz is most certainly one of them. Kamasi Washington relit my passion for the genre like nothing in ages. Frustratingly, every time I heard about an album worth checking out it proved to be unavailable (at least on Spotify). At least that didn't happen with Washington's followup to his three-CD opus. "Harmony of Difference" is supposedly a stop-gap until his next major work but it is bursting with ideas and melodies and bracing originality as much as anything out there.

CHEAP TRICK -- *We're All Alright!*

Sometimes I miss the radio, even though I never listened to it very much. Certain albums just benefit from becoming big hits or getting played to death on album rock stations. Surely those outlets should have embraced the latest from a legacy act like Cheap Trick. I had to be my own taskmaster and keep listening to this on heavy rotation until what began as simple pleasure became more and more insistent with each repeat. If you've ever dug them, dig back in.

SAZ'SIO -- *At Least Wave Your Handkerchief At Me*

World music is a treat because music in another language from another part of the world usually doesn't come to our attention unless it's damn popular or damn good or often both. I mean, somebody has to be a passionate supporter for any world music album to come to the US. Still, I do feel like a tourist. Have I pulled out that Bulgarian Women's Choir album out recently? No, but if I did I'll bet it would sound as overwhelming and awesome as ever. So I'll set aside my fears of drive-by music appreciation and embrace this terrific celebration of "the joy and sorrow of Southern Albanian music." (Is the music of Northern Albania not worth a damn or that radically different?) Anyway, it caught my eye because of the involvement of producer Joe Boyd (of Hannibal Records and Richard Thompson fame) and that was enough for me. It should be enough for you. You'll find exactly what you expect and want from world music: a certain "exoticism" because you haven't heard anything quite like this before. But it's not the faux exoticism of Yma Sumac. It's strange and new but also universal the way the best music always proves. Female voices lament and celebrate and intermingle and the music taps into something primal and for the love of god, the title of the album and the kitschy image on the cover is so damn wonderful how can you resist? I couldn't and the music did the rest. Ok, I won't become an expert in Albanian music but that doesn't make my appreciation of this any less sincere.

INDIA.ARIE -- *Songversation: Medicine*

I hate the tag of "song-versation" but I'll follow India.arie anywhere, from pop perfection to committed protest music to where she's ended up today: in the New Age section of the Grammys. Unlike Aimee Mann's inexplicable placement in folk, this actually makes sense since India.arie is definitely in New Age, yoga music territory here, exploring the power of minimal lyrics repeated over and over combined with elegantly beautiful melodies and her assured vocals. Medicine indeed.

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LARRY CAMPBELL AND TERESA WILLIAMS -- *Contraband Love*

A folk rock duo delivering the (contraband) goods. Another who-the-heck-are-they moment since the No Depression crowd has clearly been grooving on them for a while. Every time I play their album it nudges higher up on my list, always a good sign. Larry Campbell has recorded with damn near everyone (and I do mean everyone), they've got an earlier duets album that is apparently just as good and I've got more homework to do.

KHALID -- *American Teen*

ZULI -- *On Human Freakout Mountain*

LEWIS CAPALDI -- *Bloom*

Ah youth. Three young acts to get all hyped over. Khalid held up for me, despite the star-making machinery keeping me wary of him for too long. Zuli was a stumble-on-him treat. I'm not even sure where I got wise to him, but he's produced one of those pop gems by recording all the instruments in his room like a teen god Todd Rundgren and it's pure pop-rock pleasure. Really impressive. Lewis Capaldi has just put out an EP so far but that's one hell of a voice, the sort that gives you a ripple of pleasure and has any A and R person worth their salt scrambling to sign him. I'm very, very eager to hear more from each of them soon.

AIDA CUEVAS -- *Arrieros Somos: Sesiones Acusticas*

NATALIA LAFOURCADE -- *Musas Un Homenaje al Folclore Latinoamericano...*

I know slightly less about Mexican music than I do about the joys and sorrows of Southern Albanian music. But you don't need to know a thing to appreciate these two acoustic-focused sets. Cuevas gave me the fix I needed after revisiting Linda Ronstadt's celebration of Mexican mariachi music. Cuevas has an earthy, powerful presence fitting for the Queen of ranchera music. Far different is the pop singer Lafourcade, who is just a kid with a lovely pure voice exploring the roots of her country's music. Cuevas bubbles up from the earth, Lafourcade sounds like a singer in a big city cabaret. But they both connect effortlessly to the material, though surely only Lafourcade would be cheeky enough to toss in a cover of "That's Amore."

VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Southern Soul Crate*

VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Baby Driver* OST

With streaming comes my embrace of playlists. And what were compilation albums and soundtracks but -- often -- playlists before the word even existed? Certainly it ain't easy to come up with a compilation like "Southern Soul Crate," an album that avoids the most obvious hits (at least to a rube like me) but wows with one gem after another. It's the sort of thing Rhino turned out with ease back in the day. A different sort of playlist can be found on the soundtrack to "Baby Driver," a silly flick with a few fun action scenes staged to the rhythm of the songs playing on the soundtrack. (The shtick is that a getaway driver works best when jamming out to his own playlist on headphones.) Rather than diving into a genre with insight and an ear for little known jewels, "Baby Driver" takes a lot of songs you might have heard but makes them come thrillingly alive again thanks to their juxtaposition with other songs that are also terrific but which have pretty much never been played back to back before by anyone ever. It starts with "Bellbottoms" by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and never lets off the gas, driving through everything from Dave Brubeck to the Damned to Young MC. Fun, fun, fun.

RODNEY CROWELL -- *Close Ties*

JOHN MELLENCAMP -- *Sad Clowns and Hillbillies*

There's bark in those old dogs yet. Crowell was the happier surprise since I really didn't expect anything truly great from him again. But he matches his best with this late career peak. Mellencamp I just knew wasn't done yet -- he's been too consistently good for too long, if not always scaling the heights. Here his singing partners bring out the best in the rascally fellow, with Martina McBride and especially Carlene Carter (who appears on five tracks) going toe to toe with delightful results.

OZUNA -- *Odisea*

Hey, I loved "Despacito" but the reggaeton album that had me smiling the most throughout the fall was by Ozuna. Sure, "Te Vas" got me to the party but there's plenty more where that came from.

LIAM GALLAGHER -- *As You Were*

I was always more Blur than Oasis but they both made great music. And while Noel always seemed the brother to bet on, damned if Liam hasn't delivered the solo goods. High flying indeed.

DAVID RAWLINGS -- *Poor David's Almanack*

David Rawlings and Gillian Welch have collaborated on her albums and his albums and they're both in peak form on this terrific work of Americana.

JUANES -- *Mis Planes Son Amarte*

Peace and love offered up in a musical mix that sounds utterly rooted in classic Latin rhythms but contemporary at the same time. And it's a visual album a la "Lemonade" with Juanes as an astronaut bringing peace and love and great tunes to outer space. Mind you, I didn't know there was a visual album too until writing this, which is what I get for streaming instead of buying the CD!

LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO -- *Songs Of Peace and Love*

Here's an album for kids that will please anyone. This really shouldn't work -- the legendary South African band explains what each song is about and offers up platitudes of peace and love (just like Juanes!) that should have me rolling my eyes. Guys, your message of peace and love is implicit in every gorgeous song you sing. There's no need to spell it out! That's what I want to say. But their radical sincerity is so winning, so sweet and kind and direct that you get over your embarrassment about someone expressing such banal but undeniable truths and start to smile and then grin and then sing along and eventually you say, "They're right!" And as always, the songs are

delivered with a precision and purity that never fails to inspire. All you need is love, but sometimes it takes a choir from halfway across the world to remind us of what we already knew.

## **THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2017 -- AN INTRODUCTION**

If I'm honest, the albums I obsessed over the most in 2017 were by Doris Day and Dick Haymes. Thanks to a new book, I headed down a rabbit hole of great music from the glory days of pop singers like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. "The Great Jazz and Pop Vocal Albums" is a collection of essays by [Will Friedwald](#), each piece focusing on a different artist and album(s). Essentially, these are his Desert Island Discs and Friedwald (one of the great experts on jazz singers and other swingers) brings passion and enthusiasm to everything from classic albums by Sarah Vaughan and Sinatra (natch) to relative obscurities by Tiny Tim (!) and a Latin jazz piece by Della Reese. I already knew a lot of these albums, but it's impossible to hear Friedwald wax rhapsodic about some of these wax cylinders and NOT give another listen to Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. On the other hand, reading about 15-20 works I HADN'T heard before and having them ranked alongside some of the greatest albums of all time was equally irresistible. Suddenly a little-known Jack Teagarden work or a masterpiece by Johnny Hartman became something I had to hear RIGHT NOW!

And that brings me to the other sea change in my music-listening life: streaming. Along with the thousands of CDs, hundreds of cassettes, dozens of LPs and terabytes of digital audio I've compiled over the years, I now subscribe to Spotify. (Forgive me, artists! I campaign for higher royalty rates all the time.) While the service is woefully inadequate on contemporary jazz and world music, pathetic when it comes to the vast libraries of sound out there in many categories throughout history and lacking in a million other ways...it sure does offer a lot of music on tap, including pretty much anything remotely mainstream put out in the last few years.

Spotify gave me instant access to Doris Day's "Day By Day" and "Day By Night," two incomparable albums of Day at her peak, not to mention a studio recording of songs from the great musical "Annie Get Your Gun" starring Day and Robert Goulet that was a revelation for me in terms of Day *and* Goulet *and* the musical (which I've never seen but which features a lot of great songs). And Dick Haymes! The poor man's Sinatra? Never given him a second thought, but by God for one brief moment on Capitol the guy recorded two sublime albums that can stand proudly alongside Sinatra's best (namely "Rain Or Shine" and the slightly less perfect but still great "Moondreams").

So streaming has left me drowning in music possibilities. Wonderfully, I began the year diving deep into Tom Petty (before he died) and marveling how consistently good he was for so many years. I ended



the year [BingeListening to Billy Joel](#) from start to finish. (Turns out he was probably wise to stop when he did. And yes, "An Innocent Man" and "Turnstiles" are his two best albums just as I imagined, but he had more good songs in those last few years than I remembered.) And in the middle I savored Joni Mitchell. What a legend! Streaming allowed me to fill in the gaps on Mitchell and listen to her peak music from a great debut in 1969 up to 1979's "Mingus." (I haven't braved the relatively lesser works of the 1980s yet.) It's a sustained level of greatness few can come close to equalling (the Beatles, Dylan) and if you haven't heard "Blue" or "Court and Spark" or "For The Roses," what the heck are you waiting for?

Yet just as Spotify allowed me to check out some of music's major artists with unparalleled ease, I also stayed on top of new releases like never before. I checked out *hundreds* of new albums. Why? Because I could! I listened widely if not wisely, broadly if not deeply. It's an eternal struggle: do I focus on the many classic albums I could listen to again and again and discover new facets? (Stuff like Miles Davis and the Beatles and so on.) Or do I try and discover the next new thing? It's a tricky balance and streaming has left me more bewildered than ever. I think a lot of people are facing the problem critics have faced for years: too much damn stuff and not enough time to listen to it all.

I fear people are responding by taking the easy way out. They probably just jump to a new song or two, maybe glom onto a playlist for their daily workout or spend their commute depending on an algorithm to offer up music from their high school/college days that is familiar enough to be comforting and yet has a random song or two mixed in that's new to them, just enough to make them feel they're not repeating themselves. Are they diving deep into a great artist like Steely Dan by actually paying attention to "Pretzel Logic" or "Aja?" Or are they barking out, "Alexa, play Steely Dan" and then moving on after she spins four or five familiar hits? Don't worry. I haven't found the proper balance yet either.

So here's a chance to make good use of your favorite streaming service. If one of these albums sounds intriguing to you, it's never been easier for you to check it out. I'm not even bothering to include YouTube videos for key songs or links to artist websites anymore. If you don't have a streaming service, obviously you can go to YouTube and check out key tracks from any of the acts mentioned. So here are my favorite albums of the year, followed by a breakdown of what excited me about each particular act. Enjoy!

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 12:25 AM 

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