

Assessing popular music in 2024

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The past year was dominated by interconnected global crises unlike anything witnessed in multiple generations.

The continuing Israeli genocide of Palestinians, backed by the imperialist powers, drove millions worldwide into the streets to protest. The NATO countries enabled Ukraine to strike deep inside Russian territory, all but daring President Vladimir Putin to respond. Fascist parties or candidates gained ground in France, Argentina, the Netherlands and, with the re-election of Donald Trump, the US.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to claim lives and disable millions through Long COVID. Democratic rights were under constant assault, and record levels of social inequality dominated the lives of billions of workers and young people.

At the same time, the international working class engaged in major struggles against the capitalist system over the past year. Strikes by 33,000 US Boeing workers, 45,000 US dockworkers and 55,000 Canada Post workers threatened to shut down critical sections of the global economy and interfere with the waging of imperialist war. Strikes, or threats of strikes, and anti-genocide protests are now a near-daily feature of social life.

The many promising signs of genuine opposition among workers and youth found reflection among notable sections of musicians and artists this year. Some musicians spoke out publicly and forcefully against the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Serious artists, to their credit, made principled statements of opposition throughout the year.

But on the whole, popular music in 2024 remained quite detached from contemporary reality; throughout the year, musicians largely failed to take up the burning issues of our time. Far too many continue to pursue worn-out themes on personal relationships, prefer self-involved “explorations” or defer to nostalgia or ennui as thematic guideposts.

Corporate-sponsored complacency

Instead of holding a mirror up to the world, too many established and emerging musicians gazed into the mirror and contemplated themselves. The picture was not flattering.

Billionaire artists such as Taylor Swift and Beyoncé dominated popular music, exuding complacency and banality. We described Beyoncé’s latest album as “a masterpiece of corporate kitsch” and “a professional product, not an artistic statement.... Any socially significant themes have been excluded; nothing here challenges or inspires the listener.”

Commenting on *The Tortured Poets Department*, we observed that Swift’s “success is a symptom of the decay in popular music over the past several decades. It reflects an official culture unwilling or unable to look at itself critically and honestly.”

The work of British singer Charli XCX and its “viral” marketing campaign was the starkest example of the abject prostration of music before official politics. As we commented, her album *Brat* rested on “slickly marketed appearance aimed at the more disaffected layers of the

population without saying anything truly insightful.”

Even more noxious was Kanye West’s *Vultures I*, which was part of the rapper’s “ongoing romance with fascism.” Placing West’s degradation in its historical context, we observed that “encouraged and manipulated by corporate and political interests, rap, by and large, has proudly come to identify itself with social backwardness and the most toxic individualism and social indifference. Rap blossomed in the period of the decline and decay of the civil rights movement and 1970s radicalism as a whole, taking the new hedonism and obsession with money to new heights.”

Non-corporate and “independent” music has not fared well, either. As we noted in the cancellation of the annual Pitchfork Music Festival, even at its best, such music tends “toward introspection, preciousness, and a lack of lively interest in the world as it existed and its burning problems.”

Notes of opposition

However, as we note, there were important exceptions to the weakness in popular music.

The most urgent musical statement this year was “Hinds Hall” by US rapper Macklemore. The song powerfully opposed the brutal crackdown on student protests at Columbia University and elsewhere and defended the global anti-genocide protests. Its video was posted on multiple social media platforms and watched by hundreds of millions.

Macklemore’s video clearly struck a nerve and showed that principled and defiant music that speaks the truth sharply could win a large popular audience. “Hind’s Hall” also decried attempts to equate opposition to Zionism with antisemitism and condemned President Joe Biden for having “blood on his hands.” The video montages of the genocide and protests, interspersed with the song lyrics, are powerful, angry and moving.

At the same time, the song had limitations, including pointing the finger at “white supremacy” instead of capitalism. This response reflects the lingering influence of identity politics, which remains an issue that many serious contemporary artists have yet to fully overcome.

Macklemore’s subsequent song, posted in September, “Hinds Hall 2,” was also powerful and moving, viewed by over 11 million on Instagram alone. This time the rapper shifted focus somewhat, at one point stating, “Capitalism is killing us, that’s something we can’t afford.”

On the whole, Macklemore’s music and performances were some of the most socially significant of the year.

Less prominent artists also won a hearing, often on social media, by responding to major world events. Jesse Welles released several important songs that got a wide audience, including “War Isn’t Murder,” which reached over a million viewers on Instagram and on other platforms. His other notable songs confront the genocide in Gaza, poverty, the US elections, Boeing whistleblowers, and United Healthcare.

UK singer Chloe Slater gained fame through social media, reaching a wide audience with her EP *You Can’t Put A Price On Fun*. Her song “Death Trap” fumes, “Some posh boy is making jokes about going to war

/ While people are dying / And his parents are lying / In their elected seats.” She sings of the conditions facing young people, “No rooms, / Just expensive flats. / Our house is / Damp, and we’ve got rats. / The landlord is a piece of crap. / We’re twenty-one, / Living in a death trap.” In an interview with NME Radar, Slater held that popular music should reflect the cost-of-living crisis and the massive gap between the rich and the poor.

In a thoughtful song titled “The News,” young American breakout country singer Willow Avalon sings, “I’ve been watching TV. / All the current stories scare me. / All the bombs and alarms blaring / And people crying. / What’s this world come to? / All the prisoners and wrongdoing’ / While the politicians keep feeding us lies.” Clearly referencing the events in Gaza and other horrors of war, she adds, “Drinking from the water / Should never be a slaughter / For our sons and our daughters.”

Carsie Blanton’s song on “The Democrats,” condemning that party for its support for war spending in Ukraine, was viewed by over 1 million people on Instagram. Her album *After the Revolution* is generally intelligent and moving, but her EP *The Red Album* with its more “political” songs are uneven. Blanton got involved with the neo-Stalinist Party For Socialism and Liberation (PSL) during the pandemic. As we have noted on the PSL, “Far from being a genuine socialist tendency, it is a nationalist petty-bourgeois radical outfit whose principal role consists in preventing radicalized youth and workers from finding the path to genuine socialist and revolutionary politics.” Despite her political limitations, Blanton’s music is generally serious and thoughtful.

Also notable was popular singer Chappell Roan declining an invitation to perform at the White House because of her opposition to the genocide of Palestinians. Roan’s music has gained a very large following among young people due to a certain rawness and vulnerability in her songs about relationships and about embracing her lesbianism. While Roan’s songs are largely limited to matters about relationships and sex, one hopes that the talented singer will bring her opposition to war and genocide and the hypocrisy of official politics into her music.

The growth of the class struggle will provide jolts that could push artists in more meaningful directions. The artists that speak to the larger events of the day will find that audiences are hungry for precisely such work. The millions of viewers of the works of Macklemore, Welles and even the independent musicians that have gotten a large audience through social media testify to the power of serious art finding a popular audience.

We offer below a list of music that we consider generally interesting and worth considering, even if it too has its limitations. Undoubtedly, this is merely a selection of the enormous amount of music being produced throughout the world.

Popular Music

- Hells Welles*, Jesse Welles (US)
- In The Real World*, Eric Bibb (US)
- The Past Is Still Alive*, Hurray for the Riff Raff (US). Singer/songwriter Alynda Segarra has a romantic ideal of freedom, an eye for earthbound detail, sympathy for the marginalized and a belief in romantic commitment.
- Smoke & Fiction*, X (US). On its final album, the veteran punk band grapples with the world’s turmoil with energy, humor and a refusal to surrender.
- Funeral for Justice*, Mdou Moctar (Niger)
- L’Bnat*, Asmaa Hamzaoui & Bnat Timbouktou (Morocco)
- \$10 Cowboy*, Charley Crockett (US). Crockett has one of the most unique,

soulful singing voices in country music. This album takes up themes on increasingly troubled times in the US, and the difficulties of being a struggling artist (in this case the “\$10 cowboy” is a street busker). One hopes Crockett will develop these themes more sharply in the future.

-*Ngelar*, LAIR (Indonesia)

Instrumental and electronic music

Several invigorating, innovative and serious non-vocal albums stood out. The album by the industrial rock group Godspeed You Black Emperor, with a title that references the official death count in the Gaza genocide, was the most memorable, dramatic and to the point.

-*NO TITLE AS OF 13 FEBRUARY 2024 28,340 DEAD*, Godspeed You Black Emperor (Canada)

-*Ahadu*, Esi Tadesse (Ethiopia)

-*The Los Angeles League of Musicians*, LA LOM (US)

-*Moves In the Field*, Kelly Moran (US). A moving experimental piano-based album, reportedly about the death of a loved one from an accidental drug overdose. Some of the individual pieces are deeply affecting.

-*Cascade*, Floating Points (UK)

-*Two Shell*, Two Shell (UK)

-*Monolam*, Khana Bierbood (Thailand)

-*Africa Yontii*, Tidiane Thiam (Senegal). A warm and serious guitar-based album, in which many of the songs appear to take up themes involving the difficult conditions facing workers and youth in West Africa.

-*Acadia*, Yasmin Williams (US)

Jazz

Octogenarian saxophonists Charles McPherson and Charles Lloyd continue to produce some of the most soulful and serious compositions in jazz. Surrounded by talented band members, their compositions are deeply engaged in the moods and feelings of the world around them and were a breath of fresh air this year.

Julian Lage’s guitar ballads are persistently inventive, full of life and melodic surprise, and he remains one of the most promising talents in jazz. Miguel Zenon produced an interesting album centered around the history of San Francisco, particularly the treatment of immigrants at different periods over the last 150 years, and was perhaps the most rewarding jazz concept album of the year.

-*Reverence*, Charles McPherson (US)

-*Speak to Me*, Julian Lage (US)

-*The Sky Will Still Be There Tomorrow*, Charles Lloyd (US)

-*Golden City*, Miguel Zenon (US/Puerto Rico)

-*Character Pieces*, Rebecca Trescher Tentet (Germany)

-*Balance*, Daniel Casimir (UK)

-*Sunday Morning Put-On*, Andrew Bird (US). An album of jazz covers by the talented multi-instrumentalist singer.

Hip-Hop/Instrumental

-*The Thief Next to Jesus*, Ka (US) - The most impressive hip-hop album of the year for its seriousness, intelligence and commitment to struggle.

-*Samurai*, Lupe Fiasco (US)
-*Service Merchandise*, Previous Industries (US)
-*Duangkamol*, Pimao (Thailand/Germany). A unique record-sampling album, with a distinct and creative mix of East and Southeast Asian music influences.

Songs

-“Hind’s Hall,” Macklemore
-“Hind’s Hall 2,” Macklemore featuring Anees, MC Abdul, and Amer Zahr
-“The Democrats,” “Suddenly the Spring,” “Hope,” Carsie Blanton
-“Let It Rain,” MC Abdul
-“War Isn’t Murder,” “Fentanyl,” Jesse Welles
-“The News,” Willow Avalon
-“Death Trap,” Chloe Slater
-“Norther,” Ex-Easter Island Head. One of the most elevating non-vocal songs of the year, continually building on the song structure.
-“Starburster,” Fontaines D.C. This was one of the livelier “pop” songs of the year, taking aim at the degraded nature of the music industry. The Irish band also made a commendable protest speech at UK Rolling Stones Awards, denouncing the Zionist genocide in Gaza - one of the few “popular” rock bands to do so in the insular award ceremony environment.
- “Hard Times,” David Byrne. A cover of Paramore’s original song. The energetic cover by the 72-year-old Byrne is full of life and warmth, especially the horns and percussion.
-“Now and Then,” The Beatles. This unfinished demo from 1970 was re-created with the assistance of AI to separate John Lennon’s vocals from the piano and the background noise and has received two Grammy nominations. The song and video are a moving and playful tribute to John Lennon, George Harrison and the Beatles as a whole.
-“Moon & Stars,” The Mavericks, featuring Sierra Ferrell
-“Back on 74,” Jungle (UK) Highlighted mainly for its effective video collaboration with a British dance troupe, showcasing a refreshing emphasis on creative, collective movement and interplay, giving more color and depth to the song itself.



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