25 SONGS THAT MATTER NOW

Songs from Spotify

FULL TRACK

It's rare for a musician to shock anymore. Mikaela Straus says [expletive] that. By Lizzy Goodman Hanging out with King Princess can feel like entering a time warp. At 21, she has the lush, broken voice of a hard-living lounge singer in a David Lynch film, and her music is similarly timeless: guitar-driven torch songs with lyrics sharpened by what sounds like a thousand years of love gone wrong. Listening to the yearning R&B swoon of "Prophet" — from King Princess' debut album, "Cheap Queen" — you may imagine its maker as a sad-eyed recluse, one who wears her sorrow like armor. But in person — her birth name is Mikaela Straus — the singer comes off as a different kind of throwback: a bawdy, trash-talking caricature of old-school rock 'n' roll excess. **Read the profile**

Hanging out with King Princess can feel like entering a time warp. At 21, she has the lush, broken voice of a hard-living lounge singer in a David Lynch film, and her music is similarly timeless: guitar-driven torch songs with lyrics sharpened by what sounds like a thousand years of love gone wrong. Listening to the yearning R&B swoon of "Prophet" — from King Princess' debut album, "Cheap Queen" — you may imagine its maker as a sad-eyed recluse, one who wears her sorrow like armor. But in person — her birth name is Mikaela Straus — the singer comes off as a different kind of throwback: a bawdy, trash-talking caricature of old-school rock 'n' roll excess.

In the time we spent together, I saw her mime masturbation after talking about how hot she thinks the singer Rosalía is ("She gave me a hug, and I was like, 'You smell good."); declare that if she were a man, she would "have a small [expletive], but it would work good"; and announce that she

wants to give her girlfriend a cast of her vagina for their anniversary. In between takes at the video shoot for “Ohio” — a slow-burn ballad that descends into an unhinged rock jam — she asked several members of her team to smell her armpits (noting that the left one was noticeably more rank than the right) and talked colorful smack about other artists, esteemed music-industry institutions and an ex-girlfriend’s new girlfriend. “I want you to come to my apartment after this,” she said, staring me down during a moment of tenuous calm as her makeup artist sprayed a fine mist of glittering fuchsia across her cheekbone, “because I can tell it’s inconvenient for you.” **Continue Reading**

Lizzy Goodman is a journalist and the author of “Meet Me in the Bathroom,” an oral history of music in New York City from 2001-11. She last wrote for the magazine about the U.S. women’s national soccer team and pay equality. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture’s “The New Black Vanguard.” This is her first assignment for the magazine.

FULL TRACK

There’s “growing up,” and then there’s what happened to Tyler Okonma. By Carvell Wallace How thrilling must it have been to be a young teenager in 2008, witnessing the birth of Odd Future, a Los Angeles collective of skater kids. They must have made it feel possible to do everything and be every way you wanted to but weren’t sure was allowed. I was too old to be that sort of fan when Odd Future dropped its first mix tape, but when I saw Tyler Okonma — the rapper Tyler, the Creator — one of the collective’s breakout stars, reclining on the couch of the reborn “Arsenio Hall Show” a few years later, feet up, explaining a youthful worldview that was as harebrained as it was shrewd, as unmannerly as it was undeniable, my first thought was that I wish he had existed when I was teenager. I needed him. **Read more**

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He was a force, eating cockroaches in music videos, fantasizing about murder and suicide, delighting in hiding behind a veneer of edgelord homophobic, misogynist lyrics. His was a youthful, playful, nearly theoretical form of destruction. He reveled in blurring the line between character and artist and troll, between ego and id. Yet he was so sure-handed in his artistry, so unfettered, that he was

precisely what I, and probably you, could have used as a kid: someone who does not care about anyone's rules but seems such a genius that no one opposing him could ever be taken seriously. Your parents can ground you; they can't do a thing to Tyler. Thus: He represented freedom. A grisly and dark one, for sure, but a freedom nonetheless.

His growing up came in stages. On earlier albums like "Bastard" (2009) and "Goblin" (2011), he is still thrilled by the unassailable powers of potty mouth, enchanted by the possibility of scandalizing people in a way that rap used to but hadn't in years. On "Cherry Bomb" (2015) and "Flower Boy" (2017), he's thrilled by the power of music itself, and perhaps by the power of success, too. On "Flower Boy," in particular, he is writing about a male lover — plot twist! — and is now brimming with questions about life and love, beauty and bees. The annoying-little-brother skater Tyler is certainly still in the building, but quite often his inclusion feels like an afterthought, a decision made in postproduction, a conciliation to the fans that stop him at Six Flags and ask for pictures in hopes of validating their own flagging youth.

Then comes last year's "IGOR," and it's an entirely different game. For many longtime Tyler fans, the album felt like an insult: Where are the bars, the bangers, the middle fingers? But as anyone doing a close reading of Tyler's discography knows, the real "IGOR" was with us all along. Here the production wizardry and pure musicality he explored on "Flower Boy" meets the earnestness of "Cherry Bomb." And the fact that the man who once rhymed "Aretha" with "urethra" had now made an entire album about one single breakup? Well, that's the biggest middle finger to anyone missing the old Tyler.

All this was brought into vivid relief on the album's first and only single, "Earfquake," anchored by a pop-friendly three-chord progression, vocals by the Gap Band legend Charlie Wilson and a verse from the rapper Playboi Carti delivered so breezily as to almost be a parody of a Playboi Carti verse. Tyler later admitted that he originally wrote it for Justin Bieber or Rihanna, both of whom passed before he took it himself. The Gap Band influence is strong: You can easily superimpose Tyler's chorus over the verse chords from one of its biggest hits, "Outstanding" (1982), and Wilson's influential voice technique — later imitated by the likes of Keith Sweat and Aaron Hall of Guy — is present here, in a telescopic callback to the late '80s New Jack Swing he helped inspire.

For me though, what hits hardest about "Earfquake" is that

Tyler presents a version of himself with no room to spare. The song, like much of the album, finds him at a loss. He has ditched the safety of youthful disaffection to seek love and some version of earnestness — but, surprise, it hurts. Such is the cost of genuinely trying to care. “Don’t leave,” he begs, “it’s my fault.” This is a Tyler without an answer. The certainty is gone, replaced with pleading. He is refreshingly, if painfully, not in control. We’ve already heard angry Tyler, swaggering Tyler, depressive and violent Tyler, double-middle-finger Tyler and I’m-too-smart-for-all-this Tyler. “Earfquake” is the first time we hear a Tyler in need of someone else. The ground beneath his feet has indeed been shaken.

This pop-fueled exploration into genuine vulnerability — not in the sense of baring all, but in the sense of being open to being harmed — has reached a broader audience than any of Tyler’s other work ever has. “IGOR” was the first No.1 album of his decade-plus career; it netted him a Grammy. Musically, production-wise, it’s his most skilled creation, and literarily it’s his most completely thought-through. It can’t be everyone’s favorite. But since his first solo effort in 2009, Tyler has gone from hating himself to loving himself to loving someone else — with all the destruction and emotional detritus that brings. I can’t think of a better definition of growing up than that. ■

Carvell Wallace is a contributing writer for the magazine and a podcaster based in Oakland, Calif. He last wrote a feature article about the film “Queen & Slim.” Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Stephane Cardinale/Corbis, via Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

The solo star evolves teen pop — into the 1970s. By Lindsay Zoladz It’s almost unprecedented to see all the former members of a boy band vie for a solo career at once, but One Direction was always different. Niall Horan, Louis Tomlinson and Liam Payne have tuned their respective antennas to what they believe makes a pop hit these days: aping Ed Sheeran, a duet with the hitmaker Bebe Rexha or a bad-boy-by-numbers approach. But their former bandmate Harry Styles, the one people over 30 would recognize on the street, has elected to make what you’d almost have to call baby-boomer music. He cites Van Morrison, Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell as his influences; he dresses like Mick Jagger circa “Exile on Main Street.” And he made last year’s “Fine Line,” a throwback to album-rock days that has somehow become a streaming-era hit. **Read more**

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You can see why "Adore You" became the album's defining single: It's the one in which past and present coalesce most seamlessly, its playful psychedelia streamlined into sleek modern hit-making. It lets Styles show off the full, androgynous range of his voice: The ethereal high note he hits in the chorus is the equivalent of the sheer Gucci blouse he wore to last year's Met Gala. Styles has the cross-platform popularity to take some risks in his music — and in a world hyperfocused on the next big thing, he's managed to repurpose the past to become a new kind of star. ■

Lindsay Zoladz is a critic, a reporter and an essayist in Brooklyn. She was previously a staff writer for The Ringer and before that the pop critic for New York magazine. It is her first time writing for the magazine. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Kevin Mazur/Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

A ghastly moment in the family history. By Zandria F. Robinson Brittany Howard, progeny of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Prince and owner of all genres, took herself to the proverbial woodshed (in this case a greenhouse in Topanga, Calif.) and made a black-queer-Southern-feminist debut solo album that rings up Meshell Ndegeocello's "Bitter" from the future. Named after her big sister, who, before she died of a rare eye cancer at 13, gave Howard the best tools a big sister might — poetry and sound — "Jaime" feels like that elusive and mystical other side of grief, where tears, no longer happy or sad but something much greater and far more satisfying, surprise and amuse. **Read more**

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Heretofore known as the luminous frontwoman of the blues-rock band Alabama Shakes, Howard has been lionized by Southerners and non-Southerners alike as the region's radically reconstructed blues woman, its weird, funky rock

savior and an emblem of a South that might finally see promiscuity and difference — racial, sexual, sonic — as a liberal good. Howard herself has palpably resisted this role and its box, in part by genre-hopping from garage rock to Americana in the groups Thunderbitch and Bermuda Triangle. On "Jaime," this resistance appears effortless, intimate, self-evident and interior.

Here, Howard models luscious generosity toward herself as a woman, lover, Southerner, daughter and sister, modes of being that spread to every crevice of the album. She deftly guides her voice — a divine, soaring, hand-to-hand, declarative, love-soaked instrument only made more expansive in service of herself and her sound alone — through the varying registers of the blues. **Continue Reading**

Zandria F. Robinson is a writer, professor and cultural critic based in Washington. This is her first article for the magazine. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

FULL TRACK

A bachata singer is keeping old-fashioned romance on the charts. By Jody Rosen Is romance dead? If you listen to the radio or scroll through a streaming playlist, you may find yourself wondering where the love has gone. Today's pop often focuses dispassionately, at times clinically, on carnal matters — a vision of romance as a not-very-sexy zero-sum contest for sex that, perhaps, captures the embattled mood of 2020. But there are exceptions. Romeo Santos, the bachata superstar from the Bronx, is a balladeer of the old school: Courtly and theatrical, he lavishes the women in his songs with entreaties and worshipful words, venerating love itself as a kind of holy force — a deity that beams golden light down through the skylight and into the boudoir. **Read more**

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Santos's old-fashioned passions are displayed to greatest effect in the songs in which he pines for lost loves. "El Beso Que No Le Di," a duet with Kiko Rodriguez, is one of those: a melodrama about a jilted lover who attends the wedding of his ex. Over a typically sensuous bachata arrangement — floating melody, jittery guitar line, chattering bongos and

A bachata singer is keeping old-fashioned romance on the charts.
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guiro — the singers take turns, but it is Santos who commands center stage: His voice, a falsetto pitched somewhere between Aaron Neville and a chirruping bluebird, is one of pop's great sounds. The song is a lament about "the kiss that I didn't give," but Santos, a child of hip-hop, has a way of slipping in boasts alongside his plaints. "She won't forget Romeo," he coos. "Unh-unh." ■

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of "Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere," to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Johnny Nunez/Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

Pop's best humblebraggart lands a sly protest song. By Jody Rosen For more than a decade, Taylor Swift has been pop's top bellyacher, turning a now-familiar set of grievances into great songs. In "The Man," she channels that indignation into a broader protest against the sexism and skepticism that all women face.

For more than a decade, Taylor Swift has been pop's top bellyacher, turning a now-familiar set of grievances into great songs. In "The Man," she channels that indignation into a broader protest against the sexism and skepticism that all women face.

[Verse]

I would be complex ––br–– I would be cool

Pop's best humblebraggart lands a sly protest song. By Jody Rosen

The lyrics may prompt a chuckle — Taylor Swift, cool? — but the aggravation behind them is palpable: "Complex" is a descriptor journalists toss hither-and-yon at male musicians but apply sparingly to the likes of Swift.

[Verse]

When everyone believes ya --br-- What's that like

The song's most hard-hitting line is a plaintive rhetorical question that calls to mind a #MeToo movement slogan: #BelieveWomen.

[Chorus]

'Cause if I was a man --br-- Then I'd be the man

As a lyricist, Swift's great strength is storytelling. But "The Man" turns on a punchline that calls to mind the pun-happy pros of Nashville's Music Row, where Swift cut her teeth as a songwriter.

[Verse]

Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves

In recent years, Swift's "power moves" have extended to the eternal music-industry struggle between labor and management: She has squared off with Spotify about royalties and clashed with record executives over control of her masters.

[Verse]

So it's okay that I'm mad

> Maybe "The Man" is best seen as an update of Swift's earlier smash "Shake It Off." Where that hit deflected sexist slights with cheeky humor and passive-aggressive musical pep, Swift has — like so many women in this era — embraced something more robust: the power of anger without apology.

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of "Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere," to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Mat Hayward/GC Images, via Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

Her transgressive, melancholy pop led to mainstream stardom. By Jonah Weiner

Sometime during the night of Sept. 4, 2018, Billie Eilish took her own life — in a dream. "I jumped off a building," she recalled recently. What was most alarming about it, as she looked back, was how little it alarmed her. "I was in a really bad place mentally," Eilish said; the dream struck her less as a nightmare than as a grimly alluring fantasy. The next day, she approached her older brother, Finneas O'Connell, a songwriter and producer, and told him about it. They have collaborated on every piece of music she has put out, and she presented the dream to him as possible inspiration for a new song. **Read the profile**

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Jonah Weiner is a contributing writer for the magazine. He last wrote about viral narrative ads. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

Jonah Weiner

You can imitate the 1% or resent them — or, in this case, both. By Jody Rosen Damini Ebunoluwa Ogulu, the singer-songwriter known as Burna Boy, is arguably the biggest star in Afrobeats, a catchall term for the plush, funky genre centered in Nigeria and Ghana. Afrobeats draws on American hip-hop, Jamaican dance hall and London club sounds, but in recent years the flow of influence has reversed, with superstars like Beyoncé and Drake borrowing from, and collaborating with, Afrobeats singers and producers. Burna Boy's 2019 album, "African Giant," epitomizes the appeal: smooth vocals and slinky rhythms powering songs whose lyrics range from come-ons and braggadocio to forays into politics and protest. **Read more**

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This big hit, named for the billionaire industrialist Aliko Dangote, may at first appear to be a straightforward boast: Burna Boy touting his industriousness and indefatigable drive to "find money." But the return, again and again, to the figure of Dangote — and the catalog of other Nigerian tycoons and politicians invoked in the song's coda — suggests a more ambivalent message. Burna Boy is describing a system that elevates a lucky few to positions of unimaginable wealth and leaves millions scraping and scrambling. The video, with its images of working-class Lagos, sides with the masses. But ultimately the song is reportorial: a dispatch from a pitiless world in which that refrain — "Dangote, Dangote" — functions as both a striver's mantra and a yelp of despair. ■

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of "Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere," to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Maury Phillips/Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

A young band leaps off the musical grid — and into something refreshingly human. By Jeremy D. Larson One-two-three *four* ... one-two-three *four* ... — at least that's how I count out the opening riff of "953," a brazen statement of purpose from the guitarist and

singer Geordie Greep, pictured, off black midi's 2019 debut album, "Schlagenheim." Or I tap it out on the desk: thumb, index, pinkie, ring ... thumb, index, pinkie, ring. Four big notes and two little ghost notes, making up a riff that clambers over the beginning and end of the song. A minute in, they do something similar, except now they make that last beat stretch and hang in the air as if time has stopped, and a whole song's worth of drumming seems to crowd in. **Read more**

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A young band leaps off the musical grid — and into something refreshingly human. By Jeremy D. Larson ▼

It sounds like proof of life in our digitized and automated world, orchestrated by four curious whelps from Britain trying to break music off its perfect mechanical grid and into unpredictable, imperfect spaces.

The band's name comes from a niche genre of music that exists almost exclusively on the internet. A "black MIDI" song — the genre, not the band — is one with so many notes, crammed so tightly into composing software, that the staff becomes one thick black line, darkened with millions or billions of notes. The musicians and programmers who create this are called blackers, and their work sounds like a legion of grand pianos at war inside an unusually crowded Dave & Busters. This is part avant-garde process music, part one-upmanship, part stress test on what a song can contain and what will happen when a computer can't handle it anymore. The song "Armageddon v3," by Gingeas, consists of a single note repeated 93 trillion times and is definitely unplayable on your laptop, unless you have 256 terabytes of hard-drive space lying around.

The band black midi doesn't share many aesthetics with this stuff, but there's something apt to the name, a puckish appetite for disruption. The four musicians came together as teenagers at the BRIT School for Performing Arts and Technology in London, making wiry, odd songs born out of a boundless Gen Z curiosity; they're filled with long improvisations and impressionist lyrics that suggest there's more life in the underbelly of a moneyed city than there could ever be on its gilded surface. "953" is particularly experimental: Its time signature shifts constantly, from a

light-speed onslaught to a relaxed, cavernous crawl and then back. By the end, the band repeats its opening riff while steadily slowing the tempo with impossible precision, like a clock winding down.

Between Morgan Simpson's cephalopodic drumming and Greep's ancient croon, the band does have a mathy, prog-rock air — but in place of the pretensions normally associated with hypertechnical music, black midi has a kind of pathos. Here they are in this computational age, building whole songs around human uncertainty, songs that keep fidgeting and breathing, even when they're only repeating a few handfuls of notes. The music's code is so restless, so elastic, that it resists classification; it hides from the algorithm. Music like this can be a respite from our increasingly mechanized soundscape, smoothed out by Zambonilike digital tools that ensure tempos never vary and nothing is out of place.

The way music reaches its listeners is becoming increasingly opaque, too, policed by a computational process that has redefined the spaces in which we listen to and share songs. There are now, literally, hidden proprietary digital codes that shape the way music is distributed and ranked, and we are being conditioned to view their effects as an accurate measurement of the world — to assume that the most-streamed song must be the most popular one, even when we are clueless about the source of the underlying data.

But that grand rubato at the end of "953," the riff becoming slower and slower by pure feel — that's something that feels untouched by a machine. These four guys pushed this dented jalopy of a song to its breaking point, and now it's sputtering out on those four notes, one-two-three *four* ... one-two-three *four*. ... This small and simple line of code programs into the song a high possibility of being omitted from big popular playlists because it is neither clean nor harmonious. It suggests something both obvious and inevitable: In a genreless future, alternative music won't be a response to what is popular — but an attack on the computational nature of music itself. ■

Jeremy D. Larson is the reviews editor for Pitchfork. He previously wrote for the magazine about the word "relatable." Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Yis Kid.

FULL TRACK

Last year's big song just keeps on giving. By Wesley Morris Is there any getting over this song? Isn't there some new town road we should be strolling down? The charts say we've moved on to "The Box" and "Roxanne" and "Hot Girl Bummer." I heard a different

story at a Christone (Kingfish) Ingram concert last month. Ingram is a strong rockin' blues musician — a traditionalist, basically, who can set fires with his guitar — and I expected him to stick to the traditional script. But Ingram is also 21, just a few months older than Lil Nas X. What does he care about scripts? **Read more**

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>
> He just started connecting a little bit of then to little bits of now. The connection made that night in his ferocious, flabbergasting instrumental dismount was between Prince and "Old Town Road." He didn't give it the novelty treatment, two bars then onto the next; he stayed there and made love to that song as if it had been around for half a century, as if he were conceived to it. Suddenly, it was "Hotel California," "Stairway to Heaven." Meaty, serious, canonical.
>
> "Old Town Road" is the longest-running chart-topper ever. It spent 19 weeks up there. A whole summer! **Continue Reading**

Wesley Morris is a staff writer for the magazine, a critic at large for The New York Times and co-host of the podcast "Still Processing." In 2019, he won the Roger Ebert Award from the African-American Film Critics Association. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

FULL TRACK

How Hollywood spayed and neutered everything extraordinary about "Cats." By Jamie Lauren Keiles "Cats" is a vast and expanding ecosystem, comprising a stage show, a cast album, a fandom and now a quasi flop of a blockbuster film. This latest reworking, which came out last December, repeats the original plot of the show: A group of urbane and world-weary cats compete in an annual talent show for a chance to ascend to the Heaviside Layer, a vaguely defined yet enticing afterworld. This premise does little to justify itself, which is but one of the many charms of "Cats." **Read more**

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▼

Even in a time of so much cultural recursion — of news about memes based on tweets about news — the show amounts to something uniquely dense and strange. Last year's film neglected this fact, to its great detriment. "Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats," the overture from the movie and the show, tells the whole of this tale in microcosm.

It begins as many music stories do, with a white person imitating a white person imitating a black person. In the 1930s, the poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot wrote letters, channeling the voice of Joel Chandler Harris, who was channeling the fake black dialect of Uncle Remus. In those days, such banter was called "modernism." Eliot repackaged the bit as a collection of light verse, which was published in 1939 as "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats."

Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, the English composer, first came to know this book as a child. He returned to the text in 1977, translating the lighthearted verses into song as a diversion during rehearsals for "Evita." What emerged from that whim was a rarefied "song cycle," scored word for word to Eliot's poems. This work birthed the stage musical, which ran on Broadway for 18 years straight — finding a mainstream audience despite, or perhaps because of, its unlikely premise.

"Jellicle Songs for Jellicle Cats" is the first and strangest song in this very strange show. One of just a few not scored to Eliot's verse, it turns on a tautological refrain: "Jellicles can and jellicles do! Jellicles do and jellicles can!" These Jellicle cats are the show's only stars, but we come to know them only through oblique interrogation: "Are you blind when you're born? Can you see in the dark?" Jellicles are, and jellicles can. They run up walls and walk on wires. They were present for the construction of the Sphinx, but beyond this, "jellicle" is not clearly defined. Part of the pleasure of falling into "Cats" is letting Webber guide you imperceptibly toward knowledge. Like many great avant-garde works, "Jellicle" teaches you to understand itself.

In the original cast recording, the music does as much educating as the lyrics. The song begins in a dark alleyway, where textured horns seem to steal between shadows. The blink of a xylophone's dissonant chords suggests a pair of yellow cat eyes in the night — and further suggests the show's classic poster. This combination of music and sensual, not-quite-camp feline dance made "Cats" the longest-running show of its time, shattering records on both Broadway and the West End. The dancing cats formed their suicide cult more than 16,000 times throughout the era, as

busloads of tourists arrived to watch them die. The show's T-shirt was a best seller of the '80s, second only to merch from the Hard Rock Cafe. That a cat-themed stage extravaganza — written by a dense modernist and channeled through song and dance without any narration — could find the same appeal as rock 'n' roll-themed chain restaurants is among the most unlikely art stories ever told.

With this in mind, it makes perfect sense that infinitely regurgitative Hollywood would think to adapt "Cats" into a movie. Even as reboots go, the intellectual-property behemoth seems uniquely suited to our time: absurdist, nostalgic, a pastiche of different genres starring the internet's lead protagonist. In a time of much debate on what a blockbuster should be, the success of "Cats" onstage provides compelling evidence that the middlebrow public will show up for things that challenge the least common denominator. The movie could have done as much — but it failed.

The latest version of "Jellicle" seems afraid of everything that made the old version work. In place of spacious trumpets, the alleyway floods with synthesized, digitally echoed pianos. Instead of the allusion to the blinking yellow eyes, the song opts for what sound like actual recordings of cats' paws. The cats in the original Broadway cast album channeled the voices of stereotypical 19th-century eccentrics: the faded, screeching hag; the foppish, mincing lush; the booming, bombastic man about town. In the movie, the singers sound as smooth and radio-ready as Jason Derulo. (Indeed, one character is Jason Derulo.) This flat trepidation carries over to the visuals, in which felinity was so overexpressed that the cast looked disturbing, somehow both fully human and fully cat. The film, in other words, does not believe that its mass audience can synthesize strangeness. It struggles to explain the weird world it conjures, thus not ascending to the Heaviside Layer but landing with a thud in the litter box of culture, kicking up a cloud that quickly settles into nothing. ■

Jamie Lauren Keiles is a contributing writer for the magazine. Their last article was about the death of the YouTube star Etika. Illustration by Denise Nestor

FULL TRACK

Unsentimental rap about a father's unsentimental lessons. By Jody Rosen Denzel Curry, who released his first mixtape at 16, has always projected wisdom beyond his years. Now 25, the rapper from Carol City, Fla., is a veteran, and on "Ricky" he sounds the part: exulting over his success, repping his home turf and delivering life lessons in a voice of authority. **Read more**

Denzel Curry, who released his first mixtape at 16, has always projected wisdom beyond his years. Now 25, the rapper from Carol City, Fla., is a veteran, and on “Ricky” he sounds the part: exulting over his success, repping his home turf and delivering life lessons in a voice of authority.

The titular Ricky is Curry’s father. Many songwriters pay tribute to family and formative years, but few gaze backward, as Curry does, with a fondness devoid of sentimentality:

My daddy said: “Trust no man but your brothers”
“And never leave your day ones in the gutter”
My daddy said: “Treat young girls like your mother”
My momma said: “Trust no ho, use a rubber.”

Unsentimental rap about a father's unsentimental lessons. By Jody Rosen ▼

Curry’s life has been marked by death — he was a classmate of Trayvon Martin’s, his brother died after being tasered by the police and his old roommate, the rapper XXXTentacion, was killed in 2018.

Curry is one of the inventors of woozy-sounding SoundCloud rap, but “Ricky” is a classicist move: a hard, unfussy beat; tidy rhymes; brisk, vivid storytelling reminiscent of old-school heroes such as Tupac and Ice Cube. Like many songs on the superb 2019 album “ZUU,” “Ricky” is short, just 2 minutes 27 seconds — but Curry has the wit, and the soul, to pull off brevity. ■

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of “Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere,” to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Matthew Eisman/Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

R&B finds nostalgia's newest frontier. By Lindsay Zoladz At the beginning of the video for “Motivation,” a girl settles in front of a television tuned to BET’s defunct show “106 & Park.” The hosts introduce “the No. 1 video in the world right now: Normani!” The scene is full of nostalgia for the recent past, from the bulky TV to the white text in the corner of the screen listing the video’s directors, Dave Meyers and Daniel Russell. That spirit inhabits the video-within-the-video too. **Read more**

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The schoolyard where Normani dances evokes Britney

R&B finds nostalgia's newest frontier. By Lindsay Zoladz

Spears's "...Baby One More Time" (1998). Her tank top and commanding strut recall Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" (2003). And if the basketball court you see reminds you of Jennifer Lopez and Ja Rule's "I'm Real (Remix)" (2001), that's no coincidence. It's the same court and the same director: Dave Meyers. All three of those videos were released before Normani, who was raised in New Orleans and Houston, turned 7.

The song itself is a sunny early-aughts reverie, breaking through the depressive haze of contemporary pop radio. Recently there has been a surge in '90s-born stars nodding to the musical touchstones of their youth. A new single from Ariana Grande incorporated a verse from NSYNC; the R&B artist Summer Walker samples an early Usher hit on her current single — and also got him to perform a duet with her. Like "Motivation," these songs belong to a new generation of female idols, fast on their way to becoming the inspiration for the next wave of nostalgic pop stars. ■

Lindsay Zoladz is a critic, a reporter and an essayist in Brooklyn. She was previously a staff writer for The Ringer and before that the pop critic for New York magazine. It is her first time writing for the magazine. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Taylor Hill/WireImage, via Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

The least culturally sensitive singer still loved by all. By Jonah E. Bromwich Do people have less tolerance these days for moral ambiguity in art? That's certainly the sense you get from the going conversations about it — not just those parts where reactionaries rail against the death of artistic freedom at the hands of puritanical wokesters, but also those parts where people welcome moral engagement with the art they consume. "We're talking less about whether a work is good art but simply whether it's good," the New York Times critic Wesley Morris wrote in 2018. "Good for us, good for the culture, good for the world." **Read more**

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Artists plainly sense that they need to be more careful about what they say and depict, as comedians are constantly complaining; even fans exercise caution, acknowledging which of their enthusiasms are "problematic faves," ethical splotches marring the purity of their taste.

The least culturally sensitive singer still loved by all. By Jonah E. Bromwich

We talk about this new mode of cultural consumption constantly, but it's unclear exactly how real it actually is. Certainly, there's no risk that all art will be bowdlerized into nice stories about people saving puppies, but it's not wrong to note a fading appetite for antiheroes and bad behavior. What is clear is that there is at least one exception, an artist who breathes easily in this atmosphere: Lana Del Rey. And the greatest proof that she isn't subject to the anxieties governing her peers came last year, when her cover of Sublime's 1997 single "Doin' Time" became inescapable, ubiquitous, the alternative song of the summer.

This made some obvious sense: "Doin' Time" is a breezy seasonal anthem, built on a sample of Herbie Mann's version of DuBose Heyward and George Gershwin's "Summertime." But it also made no sense, because the song tells a story we're supposedly loath to hear. Our narrator's girlfriend "spreads her lovin' all over" but declines to sleep with him, so he masturbates grimly and then confesses to murderous desire: "I'd like to hold her head underwater." It's a portrait of male discontent, an incel ballad. It was also a widely lauded single on the most critically acclaimed album of Del Rey's career. And vanishingly few people bothered to cluck about that, or to mention the lyrics at all.

The selective silence was similar when Del Rey's album arrived in late summer and listeners began quoting their favorite lyrics, especially lines from the opening track. "Goddamn man-child," they tweeted, or "Your poetry's bad and you blame the news." These were revealing choices: Del Rey isn't using the title track to humiliate a sad-sack partner. She's bemoaning the way she remains in thrall to him. It's just that the lines in which she acknowledges her powerlessness — "Why wait for the best when I could have you?" — tended to produce less intense reactions. Even on websites full of young women joking about the sometimes-humiliating condition of being attracted to uninspiring young men, there seemed to be something less appealing about publicly embracing those lines.

Del Rey has portrayed herself in thrall to shadowy, unpleasant men since the start of her career. At the beginning of the decade, when Beyoncé was singing about girls running the world and pop stars were obsessed with empowerment, Del Rey was crooning that "My old man is a bad man. ... He loves me with every beat of his cocaine heart" and that "Heaven is a place on Earth where you tell me all the things you want to do." Her 2012 debut ended with the song "This Is What Makes Us Girls" — the definition being "We don't stick together, cause we put love first." By

2014's album "Ultraviolence," she added a darker layer: Along with songs like "Pretty When You Cry" and "[Expletive] My Way Up to the Top," the album quoted the infamous Crystals song "He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)."

Yet Del Rey is popular in precisely the young-and-righteous demographic that would supposedly scold an artist into oblivion for this sort of thing. It helps, surely, that we know Del Rey can't possibly be the person she is in her songs: That person lives in an alternate dimension in which the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Hollywood and Vegas, pinups and "Lolita," are all crushed together into a context-free mood board of picturesque references and familiar phrases. Last year, Del Rey responded to an essay by the critic Ann Powers with a tweet: "Never had a persona. Never needed one. Never will." But this is like a magician's insisting the magic tricks are real. It's also exactly what Del Rey's persona would say.

We can't have a "real" relationship with this fantasy, this construct. And that has left Del Rey with the freedom to dramatize all the less-photogenic emotions that have enthralled her fans: self-abasement, self-destructiveness, moony romanticism, the appeal of someone else's power. A friend told me that, for her, Del Rey captures how confused sexuality and longing are, partly because her songs are so melodramatic that they relieve the tension inherent in craving things like submission or pain. And in doing so, she has created space for a new generation of '90s-inflected pop stars — like, say, Billie Eilish — to plumb complicated feelings. The path Del Rey has walked isn't necessarily that hard to follow: Just reject the modish turn toward authenticity, toward a carefully curated "openness" with fans. It's far more difficult to condemn someone when nothing — not her songs, not her profiles, not even her Instagram feed — gives you a clue as to who that someone is. ■

Jonah E. Bromwich is a reporter for The Times's Styles section. He writes about cultural change — shifts in the way we date, eat, think and use language and technology. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Jon Kopaloff/Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

Jack Antonoff is making good, old-fashioned, cutting-edge 21st-century albums. By Jody Rosen "Everybody Wants You," by the trio Red Hearse, is sneaky — a song that creeps up on you, working its magic by insinuation. The song begins in a dulcet mode, with the singer Sam Dew crooning over synthesizer chords. Then other sounds surface and spread across the stereo spectrum: a beat that begins as an almost inaudible pulse; harmony vocals that swell and swoop; a distorted keyboard, panned hard to the right channel, where it buzzes in your ear like a housefly or a disquieting thought you can't push from your mind. **Read the profile**

"Everybody Wants You," by the trio Red Hearse, is sneaky — a song that creeps up on you, working its magic by insinuation. The song begins in a dulcet mode, with the singer Sam Dew crooning over synthesizer chords. Then other sounds surface and spread across the stereo spectrum: a beat that begins as an almost inaudible pulse; harmony vocals that swell and swoop; a distorted keyboard, panned hard to the right channel, where it buzzes in your ear like a housefly or a disquieting thought you can't push from your mind. **Continue Reading**

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of "Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere," to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

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FULL TRACK

A song that glows with the fury of the big black women in pop's past. By Danyel Smith

To have a No. 1 pop song, even in these more-algorithmic-than-rhythmic times, is still a huge deal. The No. 1 spot determines cultural coverage, appearance fees, venue sizes. No. 1 signals to talk-show and festival bookers that an artist is enjoyed by fans across race and gender borders. No. 1 is a knee in the gut of lax awards juries. And for black artists? No. 1 means the "mainstream" *really* enjoys your music. **Read more**

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For black women, it means you have joined a superheroic clique that includes the Shirelles, Little Eva, the Dixie Cups, Diana Ross (with and without the Supremes), Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin and Gladys Knight. Gloria Gaynor, Deniece Williams and Tina Turner. Brandy Norwood, Monica Arnold, Toni Braxton, Ciara Harris, TLC, Lauryn Hill and Alicia Keys. Mariah Carey and Janet Jackson. Donna Summer and

A song that glows with the fury of the big black

women in pop history. By Danyel Smith

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Whitney Houston. Robyn Rihanna Fenty. Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (with and without Destiny's Child). Cardi B. And now Melissa Viviane Jefferson — better known as Lizzo.

Her 2017 song "Truth Hurts" became a viral hit in 2019 via a Netflix soundtrack, TikTok and tidal waves of radio play, eventually spending seven weeks at the top of Billboard's Hot 100. "Truth" is a deeply cute bop, a taunt, a million middle fingers atwirl at fear and heartbreak. Lizzo has given late credit to the songwriter Mina Lioness for using a Lioness tweet in the song, but "Truth" is about more than being "100 percent that bitch." When Lizzo singsongs, "You coulda had a bad bitch/Noncommittal/Help you with your career/Just a little," I hear Lauryn Hill chanting, "You might win some/But you just lost one." That line, from Hill's 1998 "Lost Ones," is one of the most satisfying chin checks in pop history — and "Truth Hurts" is right in its ring.

[Diary of a Song: Watch Lizzo Make 'Juice.']

Lizzo's song glows with the fury of the big black women in pop's past. Black pop subtexts — that tension you feel in even the happiest of big black records — often function as a counterbalance for historical undervaluation, and "Truth" can be heard as payback for the erasure and exploitation of singers like Martha Wash. In the mid-1970s, Wash began her career in a backup duo with Izora Armstead called Two Tons o' Fun. Renamed the Weather Girls, they were Grammy-nominated for their 1982 classic "It's Raining Men." When Wash re-emerged as an in-demand session singer, her demo and background vocals were used as lead vocals — without permission or proper payment.

At one point Wash was suing three different labels for, variously, fraud, deceptive packaging, unauthorized use of her voice and commercial appropriation, including on Seduction's "(You're My One and Only) True Love"; Black Box's "Everybody Everybody"; and C & C Music Factory's "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)." That's Wash singing the words "everybody," "dance" and "now."

"Sweat" was on the pop charts for six months, and for two weeks in 1991 it was the No. 1 song in America. In the video, the lithe singer Zelma Davis lip-synced Wash's vocals. In the video for "Everybody Everybody," the model Katrin Quinol mouthed Wash's work. Wash's cases were settled out of court, even as her battle set in motion federal legislation mandating proper vocal credits. She never got her Lizzo moment — her own No. 1.

"The vocals that I did are my vocals," Wash said on the news

show “A Current Affair” in 1991. “This is my career. This is my life.” Insult was added to injury when C & C Music Factory’s Freedom Williams said in the same episode, “I don’t mean to be rude, harsh, callous or maligning or vilifying,” and then just said it out loud: “but I’d rather look at Zelma onstage.”

Got it. So when Lizzo raps, “We don’t [expletive] with lies, we don’t do goodbyes/We just keep it pushing like/Aye yi yi,” the message feels like “Hi, I’m Wash’s lawyer/We demand she be credited and paid/So please govern yourself accordingly.” My body mass index quivers to “Aye yi yi” joyously, every single time.

The line from Wash to Lizzo connects through the singer-songwriter Kelly Price, who helped lift the Notorious B.I.G.’s 1997 No. 1 “Mo Money Mo Problems” to immortality with her chorus: “I don’t know/What they want from me/It’s like the more money we come across/The more problems we see.” Price did appear in the video — in a small box, visible only from the shoulders up.

Sixteen years later, Price, on the red carpet for the “R&B Divas: Los Angeles” premiere, said she was pitching a reality-TV show called “Too Fat for Fame.” “How much good singing, dancing, entertaining, acting do you think the world has missed out on,” Price asked, “because somebody was told, ‘No, because you’re too big’?”

And then here comes Lizzo. Body too big. Personality too big. Talent too much. Audacity so consistent. Talking about living out of her car. About not feeling bad about feeling good. Setting the social streets afire by wearing her ass literally out, courtside at Staples Center. In the music video for “Truth Hurts,” Lizzo’s lush bits nearly fall from ivory lingerie. She rocks her heft like a safety pin through her lip.

Who’s gon’ stop a black woman from rap-singing from a place where pain hardens to growth, and tears rise steaming? We tend to uplift a black woman who works out her blues publicly, to a melody. When black girls perform, we dance. We karaoke. Everybody screams, “Goals!” God bless Lizzo for pulling up to pop culture big, loud and stomping. God forbid the black woman in the next cubicle speak a hurting truth in her indoor voice, though. On behalf of herself. To power. Or about anything else that matters. ■

Danyel Smith is a writer based in Los Angeles and the author of the novels “More Like Wrestling” and “Bliss.” Her first book of nonfiction, a history of black women in popular music, will be published by One World, an imprint of Random House, in February 2021. This is her first essay for the magazine.
Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Karwai Tang/WireImage, via Getty Images.

It's not easy to write the exceedingly normal. By Nitsuh Abebe Even for an obscure independent artist, Richard Dawson does not make things easy on himself. You could almost describe him as a tender English folk singer, but he's far too steeped in experimental music for that to work. The poignancy in his records tends to emerge from songs that can be raw, even slightly grotesque, laced with earthy rattles and croaks and dissonances. The music he writes is precisely the sort of searching, ambitious stuff we all say artists should attempt, then make awkward faces about when one tries. One running joke about his 2017 masterpiece, "Peasant," was how hard it was to recommend to friends: "Uh, yeah, it's an entire album about ... characters living in the north of England ... in the Dark Ages?" **Read more**

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So imagine when he returned with "2020," a successor on which he applies the same premise — songs about characters living in the north of England — to the present day. Singing about weavers and beggars in pre-Norman Britain at least fit the odd shapes of Dawson's arrangements and let him revel in poetic language, as when he described a settlement as "a dice of houses cast with clay and sheep dung," emerging through "a soup of starlit peat smoke." The present won't accept any of that stuff. On "2020" he's writing in plain language about shipping-center managers and U.F.O. sightings and "the guy from the vape shop." All of this risks terrific awkwardness. But if you believe in music's ability to speak frankly about how we live together, it's exactly the right challenge — and if "2020" doesn't sound as good as "Peasant," maybe it will 1,500 years from now.

Throughout "2020," Dawson manages to wring huge emotion from the extremely ordinary. A red-faced soccer dad, driving his child home from a poor performance, swallows his disappointment and lets the kid choose dinner; pub owners are surprised to find neighbors helping to save the place from flooding; a homeless man listens to children's laughter as he nods off at a chicken joint. It's difficult to pin down what it is about Dawson's performances that makes these things so richly affecting — my money's either on the

slow winding of his mournful melodies or the bellowing mournful-bear quality of his voice — but the ultimate effect is that he feels more humane than almost anything else on offer.

"Recently I've been struggling with anxiety," begins the album's first single, "Jogging," after a flurry of lumbering power chords. The characters in these songs manage to be studiously gender-neutral, but Dawson has let slip in interviews that he pictures this one as a woman. Cut loose from her job as a school counselor, she does freelance graphic-design work and fears leaving her flat; she senses judging eyes on the bus, imagines buskers slipping cuss words into "Wonderwall" as she passes. "I know I must be paranoid," she says, but as the song proceeds you consider that she may not be. She lives against a backdrop of austerity, social-service cuts, gig-economy torpor and post-Brexit nativism. The Kurdish family downstairs had a brick thrown through their window, and the police don't seem to care. "I feel the atmosphere round here is growing nastier," she says. A doctor suggests beta blockers and exercise, and she's surprised to find herself running hundreds of miles, the song lumbering and trudging along with her.

The great gut punches in Dawson's songs are the moments where people seem to care about one another on levels more visceral than any love song ever claims. Many involve parents and children, but there's an odd turn at the end of "Jogging" that has the same raw emotional pull. As the song soars up to a climax, the narrator suddenly switches to direct address: "Would you like to sponsor me for running the London Marathon?" she asks. "Though it's really daunting, we're aiming to raise a thousand pounds for the British Red Cross." Running, it seems, hasn't just helped this person physically; it has become an avenue for her to do one small, plodding thing to cut through the bad atmosphere and help someone else. And the real gut punch is what this means for the rest of the story we've just heard. Is it possible our anxious, shut-in jogger has been pouring out all of this — the work history, the paranoia, the doctor's appointments, the Kurdish family — to some stranger, somewhere on a doorstep or a park bench? ■

Nitsuh Abebe is a story editor for the magazine. He was formerly the pop critic for New York magazine and a columnist for Pitchfork. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Gaelle Beri.

FULL TRACK

He joins a long line of secular artists to take up the gospel. By Jody Rosen The archetypal pathway for American popular music runs from the sacred to the profane,

from gospel roots to secular pop. But some of music's biggest stars have traveled in the opposite direction. In 2019, Kanye West — like Bob Dylan and Prince and many others before him — sought refuge from fame (and infamy) in old-time religion, founding a gospel group and releasing "Jesus Is King," an album-length testimonial.

The archetypal pathway for American popular music runs from the sacred to the profane, from gospel roots to secular pop. But some of music's biggest stars have traveled in the opposite direction. In 2019, Kanye West — like Bob Dylan and Prince and many others before him — sought refuge from fame (and infamy) in old-time religion, founding a gospel group and releasing "Jesus Is King," an album-length testimonial.

He joins a long line of secular artists to take up the gospel. By Jody Rosen

[Intro]

Father, I stretch ––br–– Stretch my hands to You

In "Follow God," he is by turns a proselytizer and a penitent, fulminating over a sample whose beseeching lyric echoes two earlier West songs from 2016, "Father Stretch My Hands" Parts 1 and 2.

[Verse]

Not another word, letter, picture or a decimal ––br–– Wrestlin' with God, I don't really want to wrestle

Beginning with early hits like "Jesus Walks" (2004), West's songs have cast him as a man caught in a tussle between

God and mammon, a spasming seeker prone to embracing false prophets — Donald Trump, yes, but also the man in the mirror. It was less than a decade ago that West nicknamed himself Yeezus and cheekily declared, “I am a god.”

[Outro]

Give him some advice, he starts spazzin’ on me ––br–– I start spazzin’ back, he said, “That ain’t Christ–like” ––br–– I said, “Aah!”

Kanye has never been a great pure M.C. His true form is the rant, those moments — on record, onstage or online — when he stops rapping and gives voice to his ego, superego and id. In the rant that closes “Follow God,” he describes a conversation with his father. (Or is it God the Father?) The song ends with Kanye letting out a shriek: a cry of pain, a howl of spiritual ecstasy or — maybe, probably — both.

Jody Rosen is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of “Two Wheels Good: The Bicycle on Planet Earth and Elsewhere,” to be published next year. He last wrote about Colin Kaepernick and image management for a Screenland column. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photographs: Kwaku Alston/Corbis, via Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

Ezra Koenig on the beauty of the jam band. By Steven Hyden Ezra Koenig is the singer and primary songwriter for Vampire Weekend, whose 2019 LP, “Father of the Bride,” debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard chart and won the Grammy for best alternative music album. I asked him about how the album was frequently likened by critics — sometimes favorably, sometimes not — to jam bands like the Grateful Dead and Phish. **Read the interview**

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sometimes not — to jam bands like the Grateful Dead and Phish.

In coverage of a song like "Harmony Hall," there was a recurring theme of "Vampire Weekend is being provocative by having these jam-band signifiers. They're being contrarian or they're challenging the audience." Was that your intention? To a large extent it was just looking for what we thought was cool in the unfashionable pile. I legitimately think that Phish are more inspiring, forward-thinking, exciting and talented than a lot of what was higher up in the cool hierarchy. There might have been stuff when I was 14 that I thought was cooler than jam bands, for whatever reason. And then I just flipped. It's not my gut anymore. I'm familiar with a certain type of hierarchy of cool. I know it. The artistic part of me just doesn't buy it anymore. **Continue Reading**

Steven Hyden is the author of four books, including "This Isn't Happening: Radiohead's 'Kid A' and the Beginning of the 21st Century," out in September. He last wrote for the magazine about the national mood. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

FULL TRACK

There's a long history to music that assaults the senses. By Mark Richardson Dylan Brady and Laura Les met in the St. Louis suburbs in 2012 and now make manic music together as 100 gecs. They take the most flimsy and tasteless signifiers of contemporary pop — processed vocals, dubstep bass drops, trap high-hats, cheap synths, mall-punk yelps, ska's overeager bounce — and channel them into a brute-force electro-bubblegum attack. **Read more**

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"stupid horse," from their 2019 album "1000 gecs," is pop intensified, a 220-volt current coursing through our 110-volt brains. It is, in a word, extreme: The tempo is extremely fast, and the melody is extremely catchy. The lyrics, about an equine-related caper involving a sports car, are extremely absurd. They pitch the vocals extremely high, and the ripping guitar solo — along with the uncanny twirling "Whoo!" that signals its launch — is extremely weird.

There's a long history to music that assaults the senses. By Mark Richardson ▼

Those not on 100 gecs' wavelength find them extremely annoying. "So this is what music has come to?" is a common, and possibly intended, response, leading to discussions

about the warped tastes of digital natives, about information overload and diminishing attention spans. But this sort of provocation has a history. Those who are tuned into their squiggly frequency, this writer included, hear in "stupid horse" a connection to songs past where the joyful too-muchness of it all is the whole point.

Here are five more in that ignoble lineage:

Sleigh Bells *"Tell 'Em" (2010)*

As Sleigh Bells, Alexis Krauss and the guitarist Derek Edward Miller pushed the limits of gnarly guitar noise and perky singsong tunefulness. It was an mp3 world, and hearing the impossibly distorted "Tell 'Em" for the first time made you wonder if you had downloaded the wrong version.

Party Animals *"Have You Ever Been Mellow" (1995)*

Happy hardcore was a zippy subgenre of rave that bounced around the world at 170 beats per minute in the mid-1990s. The economy was good and the drugs were better, which meant that a sped-up version of an Olivia Newton-John hit reworked by Dutch producers could sell tens of thousands of copies.

Naked City *"Hellraiser" (1990)*

100 gecs cite John Zorn's band Naked City as an influence. On the inhumanly fast and startlingly brief "Hellraiser," they cycle between grindcore (that ferocious triple-time variant of punk) and tasteful supper-club jazz and back again in less than 45 seconds.

Hot Butter *"Popcorn" (1972)*

An oddball instrumental that hit the Top 10 in the U.S., its Moog-driven arrangement sounded like the future. But what most people remember about it is the weapons-grade infectiousness of its melody, which you're probably hearing in your head right now. (Sorry.)

The Trashmen *"Surfin' Bird" (1963)*

Bizarro voice? Mind-numbing repetition? All hopped-up and too fast to dance to? Perfectly engineered to drive grown-ups mad? Check, check, check and check — or better yet, gec, gec, gec and gec. ■

Mark Richardson is the rock and pop music critic at The Wall Street Journal and was previously the editor in chief of Pitchfork. He wrote about Sons of Kemet for the 2019 Music Issue. Illustration by Denise Nestor

When digital life and real life collide. By Lindsay Zoladz Destiny's Child's "Say My Name" — in which a phone call leads to suspicions of infidelity — may not have played out the same way in the age of the text message. But in "Playing Games," Summer Walker elegantly sketches out an updated version of the same feeling. "Swear that you doing the most, but we take a picture, can't post it," she sings to someone. With its slow guitar lick and slurry production, it's a late-night outpouring of bottled-up grievances. **Read more**

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There's a remix in which Bryson Tiller voices the other side of the conversation, but something about the solo version feels more in line with what Walker is trying to capture: a fed-up monologue that may well go unanswered.

Walker knows something about the smoke-and-mirrors game of self-expression in the digital era. Last November, she canceled 20 concert dates because, as she put it, touring "doesn't really coexist with my social anxiety and introverted personality." On social media, she can seem confessional and spontaneous, leading some to accuse her of faking her anxiety. Both her music and her persona remind us, finally, just how much digital communication allows us to control narratives, for better and for worse. The person on the other end may never know why you didn't post a picture or return a text — or how many selfies were deleted before getting one that told just the right story. ■

Lindsay Zoladz is a critic, a reporter and an essayist in Brooklyn. She was previously a staff writer for The Ringer and before that the pop critic for New York magazine. It is her first time writing for the magazine. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Prince Williams/WireImage, via Getty Images.

FULL TRACK

She turned "hot" into a state of mind. By Jenna Wortham The summer of 2019 had a sound, a meme, a hashtag and an entire mood set by a then 24-year-old rapper from Houston named Megan Thee Stallion. #HotGirlSummer started out as a tweet that morphed into a meme that became a chart-topping track featuring Nicki Minaj that catapulted the artist into a national spotlight, with legions of fans she has nicknamed her "Hotties." The genius of "Hot Girl Summer" is that it was much more than a song — it was a feeling, propagated by social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, of freedom and abandon that could contain everything from a performance of Megan twerking while wearing a particularly bright pair of lime green chaps to a photograph of Tom Hanks smiling beatifically while wearing a white dress shirt tied in a knot. **Read the interview**

The summer of 2019 had a sound, a meme, a hashtag and an entire mood set by a then 24-year-old rapper from Houston named Megan Thee Stallion. #HotGirlSummer started out as a tweet that morphed into a meme that became a chart-topping track featuring Nicki Minaj that catapulted the artist into a national spotlight, with legions of fans she has nicknamed her "Hotties." The genius of "Hot Girl Summer" is that it was much more than a song — it was a feeling, propagated by social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, of freedom and abandon that could contain everything from a performance of Megan twerking while wearing a particularly bright pair of lime green chaps to a photograph of Tom Hanks smiling beatifically while wearing a white dress shirt tied in a knot. **Continue Reading**

Jenna Wortham is a staff writer for the magazine and co-host of the podcast "Still Processing." She previously wrote about a reboot of the show "The L Word" for a Screenland column. **Arielle Bobb-Willis** is a photographer from New York who was recently featured in Aperture's "The New Black Vanguard." This is her first assignment for the magazine.

FULL TRACK

Four of country's leading women, in one act. By Lindsay Zoladz In 2015, country music was rocked by a controversy ridiculous enough to earn the name "tomato-gate." Explaining why mainstream country stations played only a handful of female artists, the radio consultant Keith Hill reached for a metaphor: "I play great female records, and we've got some right now. They're just not the lettuce in our salad." The lettuce included top-selling male artists like Blake Shelton and Keith Urban; the women, Hill went on to explain, were the tomatoes. **Read more**

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From Kacey Musgraves to Kelsea Ballerini, Miranda Lambert to Maren Morris, we are living in a golden age of women in country — but most of them are succeeding despite the attitudes of men like Hill. On "Redesigning Women," the debut single from the Highwomen, you hear four women's voices — Morris, Amanda Shires, Brandi Carlile and Natalie Hemby. Shires has said the idea of assembling an all-female supergroup came to her when her daughter told her she wanted to be a musician: "I thought the worst thing that could happen would be that she would go for country, because there are only currently two women's voices that you can actually hear."

Four of country's leading women, in one act. By Lindsay Zoladz

As “Redesigning Women” reminds us, plenty of women toil half their lives in the kitchen — which means they can throw together a dish with a lot more depth than a sad, wilting bowl of lettuce and a couple of tomatoes. ■

Lindsay Zoladz is a critic, a reporter and an essayist in Brooklyn. She was previously a staff writer for The Ringer and before that the pop critic for New York magazine. It is her first time writing for the magazine. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Matt Baron/Shutterstock.

FULL TRACK

The Canadian producer’s music can help you feel surrounded. By Angela Flournoy At the beginning of 2020, I wanted to close my eyes and move. I did not feel well for a number of reasons. I worried that the country was maybe going to start a new war, and maybe going to re-elect its president; I struggled with a moral and professional dilemma; and my mother was suddenly, seriously ill. I was back home in suburban Los Angeles — in her home, holed up in my old bedroom — when I wasn’t shuttling back and forth to the hospital. I was in a funk to end all funks. What I needed was to move, to sweat, to swing into a dark place filled with other people and let out a wail. But there was no time to sneak off to a club or a bar. So instead, I listened to an electronic-disco album called “Bubba,” by Kaytranada, many, many times. **Read more**

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The Canadian producer’s music can help you feel surrounded. By Angela Flournoy ▼

Kaytranada, born Louis Kevin Celestin, is a 27-year-old Haitian-Canadian producer from Montreal. He made his first album, “99.9%” (2016), in his mother’s house while sharing a basement bedroom with his younger brother. He came out as gay shortly before the album’s release. Sometimes I imagine Kaytranada in his early 20s, having never yet been with a man (as he told The Fader in 2016), sharing a bedroom in his family home. Perhaps he also felt a need to swing into a dark place filled with people and let out a wail. Perhaps this is how disco found him. It is a genre sometimes derided for prizing feeling over thinking, for using thumping bass and simple repetition to get people onto a dance floor. But that discounts the healing that can happen when people feel the urge to move.

“Bubba,” Kaytranada’s second album, is 51 minutes and 17 tracks long, but it feels like a single D.J. set, with smooth transitions from groove to upbeat groove. Toward the middle, you reach the song “10%,” whose hook has the Colombian-American singer Kali Uchis asking a question: “You keep on takin’ from me, but where’s my 10 percent?” Kaytranada layers Uchis’s voice so that there is a slight echo to her inquiry; it sounds as if she’s right next to the listener’s ear, cool but insistent, whispering while dancing. “10%” is a song about exploitation, presumably by some manager or business handler (“Run my money to me/Don’t act like you didn’t know”), but it is also a song about being weary of pretense. “You’re trying way too hard/Ego is not your friend,” Uchis sings, though she isn’t going to stop to deal with the offender; she’s got time.

The composition of the song itself seems to eschew showy effort, which is not the same as being uncomplicated. “10%” is a song whose disparate parts — steady conga drums, synthesized harps, jaunty violins — are all in service to a single purpose: movement. Most of Kaytranada’s dance songs have this propulsive quality, owing in large part to his unique use of funk-inflected drum sequences; they drive the rhythm forward as opposed to holding it in a steady, stultifying loop.

“10%” is a song you can dance to with your eyes closed. The lyrics provide texture, but it’s the rhythm itself that advises you on what to do, and you can do it as awkwardly or as expertly as you’re physically capable. Twirl, two-step or kind of roller-skate in place, sure. In this way, the song is selling what SoulCycle is ostensibly selling, what the forever-upbeat fitness coach on my workout app is selling. Looking good helps, maybe, but the real item for sale is feeling good. And whether or not you can find that dark dance floor full of strangers, “10%” is also selling the feeling of not being alone. All music has elements of emotional aspiration (we sing a love ballad and feel our own hearts swell), but dance music offers a particular, seductive aspiration — the possibility of being in physical and emotional communion with others, if only for three minutes.

I have yet to find a suitable club or bar. But I have listened to this song in the dark and imagined myself there, in the midst of a sweaty, rapturous crowd, with the only people looking at me being those within arm’s reach — and even then, only for a glimpse, before the music carries them elsewhere. ■

Angela Flournoy is the author of the novel “The Turner House.” She wrote about Mariah Carey for the 2019 Music Issue. Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photographs: Stephen Lovekin/Shutterstock.

FULL TRACK

The band finds a new sound in an act of creative destruction — and loses Janet Weiss. By Hanif Abdurraqib It is vital for artists to have an understanding of what they are good at, so that they might revel in the satisfaction of departure when the time comes. Through their 25 years and 10 albums, Sleater-Kinney have proved adept at a wide array of moves: volume and tone modulation, lyrics that balance playful cynicism with biting reality. And still, nothing consistently moves me to the edge of my seat like a Sleater-Kinney title track, especially if that title track opens the album it's named after. These openers immediately draw a line in the sand, as if to say: If you can't make it through this, you're not going to like what's on the other side. **Read more**

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▼

"The Center Won't Hold," like many of its kin in the Sleater-Kinney title-track canon, takes its position at the top of the band's 2019 album (their second since their 2015 return from hiatus). The song pulls a magic trick: It's a song inside a song. In the first part, which lasts about 2 minutes 8 seconds, voices chant, "The center won't hold" over and over again in a heavy sigh, on every third beat, with Carrie Brownstein wringing the emotion out of the verse. The mood is both ominous and cocoonlike, akin to watching tree branches lash a window during a storm while someone familiar holds you. It is also the sound of Sleater-Kinney turning away from whatever expectations a listener might have held.

When you listen to the song on repeat, the final 56 seconds feel inevitable, but I would give anything to return to the moment when I first heard it kick out of one gear and into the next. It feels like the steep drop of a roller coaster after a meandering journey to the top. The guitars grow louder, faster. The unmistakable drums of Janet Weiss are unchained. The line "The center won't hold" gets a new ferocity. As gifted as Sleater-Kinney have shown themselves to be as lyricists, a secondary excitement comes when those lyrics are honed to a fine point. A repeated line or two act as the glue for the instruments' tearing a room apart. Here, Corin Tucker loops the words with increasing volume, an attempt to keep up with the growing growl and thrash of sound at her back. "The Center Won't Hold" is the perfect

encapsulation of Sleater-Kinney at their best, eager and attacking.

The song's lyrics and the album's title bring to mind the W.B. Yeats poem "The Second Coming" — "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" — it's hard not to think of them as a parable. The band didn't emerge from this album as the same band that went into the making of it. Janet Weiss, one of the great rock drummers of all time, played on the album but departed the band before the album came out. For those who have known Sleater-Kinney and loved them for a long time, it might feel as if the band is in peak form for one last time.

Hearing the album all the way through, you can understand why Weiss didn't feel as if her role in the band made as much sense as it used to. The back half of the title track, with all its sonic ferocity, is an exception to the otherwise-glossy quality of the songs. The album still teems with Sleater-Kinney's characteristic wit and rage, but it's packaged in a lighter and more dreamlike set of sounds. There isn't as much room for Weiss's signature drumming.

"The Center Won't Hold" found a band trying newness, shifting from one template to the next throughout the album but not sounding fully comfortable in any of them. It would be easy for a longtime fan to feel disappointment. But I eventually set aside nostalgia to allow myself gratitude and admiration — not entirely for the music itself but for the aims of the band in this new era. Consistent greatness, paired with tenure, can be a recipe for complacency. Someone, somewhere, will always be eager for a Sleater-Kinney album, even if it is the exact same album as the one before it. But Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein have always been curious about the places they could push their sound, and on this album, they seem to be committing to a new set of curiosities — for the sake of survival, but also for the sake of refusing stagnation. I'm thankful for a band willing to turn corners, even as I'm heartbroken about a member of that band's being left behind.

When praising evolution and risk and becoming something beyond what people expect of you, it must also be said that the act is often one of undoing. The last 56 seconds of "The Center Won't Hold" feel like the site of an old fight that was neither won nor lost, brilliant anarchy for anarchy's sake. A band, pushing themselves and their sound to its limit, before turning out the lights on an era and running toward a new one. ■

Hanif Abdurraqib is a poet, an essayist and a cultural critic from Columbus, Ohio. He wrote about Bruce Springsteen in the 2019 Music Issue.
Illustration by Denise Nestor. Source photograph: Chad Batka for The New York Times.

Photographs by Arielle Bobb-Willis for The New York Times.

Videos by Arielle Bobb-Willis and Jacqueline Ayala for The New York Times.

Illustrations by Denise Nestor.

Stylists: Antonoff: Savannah White; Eilish: Samantha Burkhart; Howard: Nonja McKenzie; King Princess: Sean Knight; Koenig: Evan Simonitsch; Lil Nas X: Hodo Musa; Megan Thee Stallion: E.J. King.

Grooming: Antonoff: Nicole Elle King; Koenig: Candice Birns.

Hair: Eilish: Mara Roszak; Howard: Monae Everett; King Princess: Jerome Terry; Lil Nas X: Britney Thomas; Megan Thee Stallion: Kellon Williams.

Makeup: Eilish: Robert Rumsey; Howard: Monae Everett; King Princess: Sara Tagaloa; Lil Nas X: Christina Guerra.

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