

5 EPs You Missed From the First Half of 2017
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There's something to be said for the trend increasing democratization of music.

In the past two decades, we've gone from a world where popular music is inescapable (and overwhelmingly sponsored by unsavory business tactics by record labels such as payola) to one where you pretty much only end up hearing the the latest One Direction or Taylor Swift if you're actively looking for it. On the other hand, this fragmentation has allowed the individual's music listening habits to retreat further into algorithmic echo chambers created by Apple Music and Spotify. Luckily, there's still a number of great music publications out there that keep you in the loop on the latest in music (shoutout to Noisey, Pigeons&Planes, Stereogum, The Needle Drop, NPR). I figured I'd do my part by writing short reviews of some EPs I've enjoyed so far this year that I haven't seen any mainstream discussion about. Disclaimer: my taste in music is mostly hip-hop and electronic music, so take that as you will.

1.1 Zack Villere - Little Big World

Zack Villere (formerly known as Froyo Ma, I think) is a geeky white teenager from Louisiana who looks like the kid from Napoleon Dynamite. And his music is awesome.

This is the sort of album I can recommend to just about everybody. It's a bit rough around the edges, and it's not the most polished thing you've ever heard, but it comes with an overwhelming amount of charm. If I had to describe the ethos of the record, it'd be something like: "Michael Cera makes a Weezer album in the style of J Dilla." The whole thing has a very amateur-ish, lo-fi sort of aesthetic, and I mean that in the best possible way.

The instrumentals mostly consist of bouncy lo-fi synths over jazzy chord progressions, ornamented with Zack's double-tracked smooth baritone, which sometimes reaches into a not-quite-there falsetto. The record sounds like it was recorded by one dude with a surprisingly soulful voice in his room, which it honestly probably was. There's also some sort of narrative to the album, which involves (from what I can tell) Zack and his friends finding an alien in some sort of wacky Goonies-esque adventure. I don't know what that's all about, but it's a lot of fun. There are also some quirky snippets of conversations throughout the record ("All right, yo, do you guys want a Popsicle?" "Definitely, you got the mango ones?" "I got you")

It has a certain earnestness to it which really shines in the lyrics. Some of my favorite awkward teen gems include: "I'll drive you to my parents' house / And then we started making out / While we're listening to Cherry Bomb / Ordered pizza then we take it out" and "Tomorrow you want to get coffee / But I don't even drink coffee / I'm down though / I'll just drink water". These lines are delivered with a sense of honesty and just the right amount of irony and self-awareness to make the Zack Villere character likeable, and surprisingly cool.

The standout track of the album to me is *Cool*, a song about, well, wanting to be cool, and that's about all you need to know. It's a nostalgic feel-good summer jam that sums up the whole record pretty well. You can't help but bob your head to it.

The whole project is just about a half hour long and the smooth soulful vocals and warm instrumentals make for great background music. Check it out if you've got a minute.

1.2 Kero One & Azure - Kero One & Azure

I always have to shout out Asian rappers, so of course I had to plug this record, which I have seen literally zero discussion about anywhere on the Internet.

Now, I can understand why there isn't a lot of hype around this album. A pretty by-the-numbers jazz-rap album by two Asian dudes in 2017 was never going to get a lot of traction in the first place. But, even though it's not perfect, it is a solid record with a good grasp of the hip-hop fundamentals, and it deserves to be commended for that. Asians have been making contributions within the acid jazz niche for years now with artists like Freddie Joachim, Nujabes, DJ Okawari, and yes, Kero One. Aside from that, I truly believe we're on the cusp of a "second wave" of Asians in hip-hop, with artists like Rich Chigga, Joji, Tokimonsta, and Keith Ape making waves. I think viral singles like *It G Ma* and *Dat Stick* proved that the process of cultural exchange in hip-hop has already begun, and I can't wait to see the whole thing play out.

But let's get back to the record. In context, both the artists on this record were essentially ahead of their time (...or will have been, in ten years; I'm really making a lot of predictions here). Korean rapper/producer Kero One has been spitting solid bars over jazzy beats for over a decade now and Azure is a member of the hip-hop collective HBK Gang. Both are pretty much veterans of the industry at this point, and they pull off some pretty effortless flows over some smooth and polished production on this project. Jazz samples plus bars is, to me, one of the most timeless recipes in all of modern music, and I will never get enough of it.

The duo wear their influences on their sleeve: A Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets, Pete Rock & CL Smooth, Slum Village, you know, the classics. Kero One in particular has a flow strongly reminiscent of Del Tha Funky Homo Sapien and a lot of '80s hip-hop. The two (but particularly Kero) are hip-hop scholars, and they know their stuff. On the opener *Jazzhop*, for example, bars directly reference Common (who is sampled in the hook), Jay-Z, Tribe, Ice Cube, and even Kanye's interview on Sway's radio show. And that's just the opener.

Unfortunately this means at times their music borders on pastiche. For example, the mid-2000s Southern rap influenced *Winning*, where Azure does his best Big Boi impression (it's not very good). But for the most part, the rapper/producer combo adds their own unique flavor to the mix.

One of the highlights on this album is *Light It Up*, which starts with a spacey pitched-up soul sample a la early Kanye and incorporates a stellar beat switch in the second verse. There's some great wordplay on here ("Choppin beats like a vegan / Codeine with my

flow scheme”; “Marvelous rhythms, I’m sharp as a prism / Mama say I’m always stoned, but I’m carvin’ my vision”) and both rappers have an impeccable flow throughout.

Another standout is *Momma Said* which, despite featuring virtual instrument trumpets that sound like they came straight out of Garage Band, will probably put you in a good mood by the end of the song. Azure comes through with a refreshingly candid verse about the struggles of being a broke 20-something serial partier coping with a difficult breakup, while Kero One paints a vivid picture of his hardworking Korean immigrant mother who inspired him to persevere and break through as an Asian rapper. Overall, it’s a great concept for a song, and executed really well.

These two have interesting and unique perspectives which complement each other perfectly, and they sound confident on a selection of solid classic hip-hop beats. If you’re a hip-hop fan, especially a fan of ’90s stuff, you’ll probably like this. Why isn’t this record more popular?

1.3 Lapalux - Ruinism

This one just barely makes the cut, as it was released almost exactly halfway through the year on June 30th. I saved this for third because while the first two albums on this list are pretty accessible, this one is...not at all. But hear me out.

Ruinism is the latest album to come out of the Brainfeeder music label, founded by revolutionary electronic/psychedelic/jazz-influenced music producer Flying Lotus. It’s in general difficult to describe the music Brainfeeder puts out, because while it spans a huge range of genres and styles, it maintains a singular identity. The label is essentially a playground for pushing the boundaries of hip-hop and electronic music, often extending the work of Dilla, Madlib, and FlyLo himself (whose distinctive style has by now influenced hundreds of aspiring producers). If you want to get a good idea of what that sounds like, you really just need to listen to Flying Lotus. Actually, you should do that anyway.

This new record by Lapalux, though, is weird, even for Brainfeeder. Each track contorts and twists in on itself, refusing to adhere to any structure at all. I’m not sure I could even call half of the the tracks on here “songs” in the traditional sense. They’re more like soundscapes, something like audio paintings. This all sounds very abstract and high-concept, I know, but trust me that it makes sense if you’re in the right mood to listen to it. My suggestion? Listen to it alone, preferably late at night, ideally intoxicated or sleep-deprived in some way.

One of Lapalux’s primary influences has always been Foley, or the practice of creating field sound effects for filmmaking, and it really comes through in this record. There are so many sounds on here you’ve likely never made the conscious effort to listen to before, and the textural diversity of the project on its own is something to be commended for. Lapalux combines eerie detuned synths, glitchy drums, distorted voice clips, real instruments (*Data Demon* features a lengthy oboe solo for some reason), and rattling hi-hats to create something which definitely sounds like nothing you’ve ever heard before.

With the first couple of listens, most of these tracks sound almost like a horror movie soundtrack, and they’re a bit overwhelming. But the more you listen to them, the more

you realize two things all these tracks have in common. The first is an incredible attention to detail. It would be hard for someone to create a track like *Rotted Arp*, for example, without an incredible sense of focus. The harshly out of tune synths which arrive at about two and a half minutes into the track wail over each other in a cacophony that is somehow more than the sum of its parts, as you eventually are able to make out a melancholic melody rising out of the din. The second trait most of these tracks share is a sense of narrative. What I mean by this is that each track goes through a cohesive emotional arc with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, between which motifs and sounds evolve and shift.

My personal favorite track is *Data Demon*, which begins with an operatic female voice singing an aria in concert with a vibrato-heavy violin as a chorus of strings swell around them. Lurking underneath throughout the intro is an eerie bass, which crescendoes further into distortion with every cycle. Then, suddenly, the strings vanish (the voice does not), and the melancholic oboe duet begins in near silence, supplemented by uneasy reverb-soaked synth arpeggios which get louder and more intrusive throughout. A few seconds after the oboes drop out, you are assaulted by just about the most aggressive beat drop you'll ever hear in your life, with a glitchy bass relentlessly pounding in tandem with the kick drum. The track ends with the bass and drums getting faster and faster until they break off abruptly.

And that's just one track! Now, I know this kind of music isn't for everybody. I know there are a lot of skeptics out there who will just hear noise and not music. But if you dig a little bit deeper and listen closely to a couple of tracks, I would be shocked if you didn't feel at least something, even if you couldn't explain it properly. Something you perhaps don't usually feel while listening to music. And isn't that what art is all about?

1.4 Buddy x Kaytranada - Ocean & Montana

Let me be unequivocally clear here: if Kaytranada was not on this project, I would not have liked it nearly as much. This isn't to say that Compton rapper Buddy isn't good, because he's really pretty okay, and he does reasonably well over these beats; however, at the end of the day, he's not really the main appeal here. What I'm getting at is that Kaytranada is one of the best producers working today. Period. The man has got the art of mixing bass and drums down to a science (especially bass, good lord) and you really owe it to yourself to check out his work. His 2016 album *99.9%* is a great place to start.

Kaytranada's signature style is immediately identifiable. The first major thing you'll notice is the heavy, almost disorienting sidechaining; the second is the exceptionally fat kick drum; and the third is the absolutely huge wall of bass which makes just as much of a statement when it is present as when it is not. And that's Kaytranada's music in a nutshell. On tracks like the opener *Find Me*, that's pretty much all there is (along with some other Kaytra signatures, like chime arpeggios and sharp hi-hats), and it still works, which is a testament to the strength of the beats. On closer *Love or Something*, the bass has such overwhelming presence it could honestly be credited as a feature artist.

Now, like I said earlier, Buddy doesn't do a bad job at all. For example, the skeletal opener *Find Me*, on which Buddy is singing more than rapping, is an ode to urban loneliness and

substance addiction which meshes perfectly with the dark, minimal instrumental. Another standout is smoking anthem *A Lite*, on which Buddy pulls off an incredibly smooth and laid-back flow. On *Guillotine*, Buddy pulls off a virtuosic fast flow over what sounds almost like an OutKast beat (although Kaytra makes sure to throw in a weird sample just to switch things up).

Overall, it's a decent project. I can't wait to hear more from both of these guys, but for now it's nice to have some Kaytranada to tide the fans over until his next release.

1.5 Jaeden Camstra - Kids' Menu

Has anyone else noticed this trend of 24/7 lo-fi hip-hop streams on YouTube? I know a bunch of people that put these types of "radio stations" on to study or just to chill out. What's interesting is that no one ever really cares about what songs or even artists are specifically are being played – for the most part, they're interchangeable. What's more important is the mood that the beats create, the atmosphere that they cultivate as a whole.

Often these beats have a "vintage" aesthetic, even though this music is produced mostly produced by people in their teens or early 20s. As a result, most of the references go no further back than pop culture from the late '90s and early '00s. There's a lot of references to anime, cartoons, and video games. You know, stuff we liked as kids.

This is a relatively recent development and one that I was waiting to happen for a long time. My generation has finally become old enough to be nostalgic for the '90s and '00s, in the same way that the hip-hop of the early '90s was itself influenced by funk and soul music. I understand that the turn of the millenium was a very particular cultural moment, and a huge chunk of the population won't relate to this stuff, but I can't help but like it a lot.

Enter: Kids' Menu by Jaeden Camstra, possibly the most emblematic a record of the current lo-fi hip-hop zeitgeist as we're ever going to get. The record seamlessly transitions between 20 tracks of around a minute long each and encompasses all the typical trappings of the subgenre. There's vinyl crackles, heavy side-chaining, exaggeratedly swung Dilla-style drums, jazz piano and nylon guitar samples, samples from Japanese music, and lots and lots of cultural references.

Now I'm not claiming that this album is the best in the genre. But it definitely knows what kind of record it's trying to be, and occupies its lane spectacularly. In its less than half an hour of runtime, it references and samples (here we go): Nas, Super Mario, the Gameboy Advance startup jingle, Yoshi's Island, Coca Cola, Dragon Ball Z, Spongebob, Family Guy, the Nintendo Wii, Kanye West, the Wu Tang Clan, Adele's 19, and Hey Arnold. I don't know if this describes your childhood and adolescence, but it sums up mine pretty well. Even the track titles make you nostalgic: Saturday morning cartoons, watching infomercials late at night, waiting in your mom's car at the stoplight, and of course, ordering chicken tenders off the kids' menu. This is the childhood manifesto of a first generation kid with a genuine love for anime, video games, hip-hop, and American pop culture.

Now I haven't really talked about the music itself that much, because I think that's almost missing the appeal of this kind of record. But I will say that the track *wii* has an incredible smooth jazz sample with an infectious lead synth melody (if anyone knows what it is, please please let me know). By now, you should already know if you need this EP in your life. If you don't get the appeal, I'm not sure I can explain it any more than that. The Youtube video above actually has the entire album, so check it out.