

The New York Times Magazine



MARCH 14,
2021

THE MUSI-C ISSUE

THE SONGS, SOUNDS AND SINGERS THAT GOT US THROUGH A YEAR OF ISOLATION.
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THE SONGS, SOUNDS AND SINGERS THAT GOT US THROUGH A YEAR OF ISOLATION.

F.E.A.T. MOSES SUMNEY



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The New York Times Magazine

THE SONGS, SOUNDS
AND SINGERS THAT GOT
US THROUGH A
YEAR OF ISOLATION.

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We solve puzzles like our lives depend on it.



Researcher Gordon Freeman, PhD

When we face a deadly opponent like cancer, we keep looking for better solutions. The PD-L1 pathway discovery by Gordon Freeman, PhD, showed how the immune system can be enabled to attack cancer cells. The application of this learning by Margaret Shipp, MD, led to new treatments for Hodgkin lymphoma and a related lymphoid malignancy. Combining treatments of the PD-L1 and CTLA-4 pathways, Stephen Hodi, MD, created a “double assault” that is effective for melanoma, kidney and other cancers. Building one solution on the shoulders of another has fueled the momentum of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute for nearly 75 years.

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Contributors

John Edmonds	<i>Photographs throughout</i>	John Edmonds is an artist working in photography who lives and works in Brooklyn. He is known for his intimate portraiture focused on the self-fashioning of young Black men on the streets of America. His monograph "Higher" was listed as one of the top 25 photo books of the year by Time magazine in 2018. His first solo museum exhibition, "A Sidelong Glance," is currently at the Brooklyn Museum through August. For this issue, he photographs some of the year's best musicians. "Each talent was compelling in their own right," Edmonds says. "A light of their own."
Hanif Abdurraqib	<i>Emma Ruth Rundle and Thou, Page 51</i>	Hanif Abdurraqib is a poet, an essayist and a cultural critic from Columbus, Ohio.
Ryan Bradley	<i>J. D. Beck and DOMi, Page 34</i>	Ryan Bradley is a writer in Los Angeles. He last wrote about how cheap synthesizers are changing electronic music.
Sarah Burke	<i>"Oops' Goes Digital," Page 47</i>	Sarah Burke is a writer and an editor based in Brooklyn. She was most recently the special-projects editor at Vice.
Aaron Lowell Denton	<i>Illustrations throughout</i>	Aaron Lowell Denton is an artist and a designer in Indiana known for his music-poster designs.
Dessa	<i>"Showstopper," Page 25</i>	Dessa is a writer and a musician. Her most recent album is "Sound the Bells."
Larry Fitzmaurice	<i>Dua Lipa, Page 48</i>	Larry Fitzmaurice is a writer and an editor whose work has appeared in The Guardian, New York magazine and GQ.
Lizzy Goodman	<i>Moses Sumney, Page 40</i>	Lizzy Goodman is a journalist and the author of "Meet Me in the Bathroom."
Jeremy Gordon	<i>Beverly Glenn-Copeland, Page 32</i>	Jeremy Gordon is a writer from Chicago whose work appears in The New York Times, Pitchfork, The Nation and other publications.
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Steven Hyden	<i>Taylor Swift, Page 17</i>	Steven Hyden is the author of four books, most recently "This Isn't Happening: Radiohead's 'Kid A' and the Beginning of the 21st Century."
Jamie Lauren Keiles	<i>Sam Hunt, Page 18</i>	Jamie Lauren Keiles is a contributing writer for the magazine.
Alexandra Kleeman	<i>Sophie, Page 30</i>	Alexandra Kleeman is the author of "Something New Under the Sun," a forthcoming novel.
Damon Krukowski	<i>"Union Songs," Page 55</i>	Damon Krukowski is a musician (Damon & Naomi and Galaxie 500) and a writer ("The New Analog" and "Ways of Hearing") in Cambridge, Mass.

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Readers respond to the 2.28.2021 issue.

RE: KAZUO ISHIGURO

Giles Harvey profiled the Nobel Prize-winning novelist.



Thank you for a sensitively written, deeply compelling picture of Ishiguro and his animating philosophy. The books of his that I've read have now come alive in a new way, and that is for me the real and only purpose of literary criticism.
Sam, Singapore

This is one of the best articles I've read in The Times in quite a while. I commend the author of it and the editors who put it together. I also commend Giles Harvey on noting the detail of Ishiguro's employment as a beater on the hunting grounds of Balmoral. That point alone explains so much to me about his writing. I thank you for that nugget of information. Excellent work, excellent interview.
S.H.G., Halifax, Nova Scotia

I don't usually finish an article like this. However, the questions about the fate of liberal democracy and the meaning of being human kept me attentive. The comparison of the "donors" in the novel "Never Let Me Go" to "essential workers" stirs again my awareness of what is wrong today; as does the accumulation of more wealth by the few. I am fortunate: retired, comfortable, able to be a spectator — but not quite. Thanks to Giles Harvey for this work and to everyone who posted their comments online. If anything gives me hope, it's the possibility we can all listen to one another with respect and appreciation. And, even if Joyce did say it first, it is worth remembering, mistakes "are the portals of discovery."
Ron, Oakland, Calif.

This captivating description of a brilliant novelist and his works engaged me as few articles ever have. That I've somehow missed reading any of Ishiguro's novels will soon be corrected, but I am forewarned by having first read Giles Harvey's feature article and the online comments made so far. The message that societies and systems that have formed throughout the world are now coalescing around competing mechanized tribal identities that squander the individual is a depressing one. There's not much room for nuance given daily pressures on most individuals to just get by and only cope with the growing extremes and intractable problems on every scale. I hope future works by this incredibly thoughtful author focus on a way out of this thicket.

Will, Lakewood, Wash.

RE: SPADES

Hanif Abdurraqib wrote about playing the card game with his friends.

What a charming essay! It brought me back to childhood, with men playing hearts in the store next to my mother's when business was slow, the specific game less important than the camaraderie. It also took me back five decades to a whist party at the home of Black friends on the South Side of Chicago, where my husband and I spent most of the evening as the only white guests. We were taught the game and just had a wonderful evening laughing and mixing with the other guests. We moved away soon after, but that evening remains a delight to remember.
Barbara, South Carolina



Oh, my, this was such a wonderful piece. I absolutely loved being transported to a



THE STORY, ON INSTAGRAM

Great man.
Great cover.
[@gertalbrecht](#)

place of cards, friendship and so much love. My mom taught me Spades way too many years ago, and I can't remember the last time I played. But I think it's time to refresh my memory and sit down with some people I love and maybe, just maybe, pass a little bit of the beauty of this on.

Patty Robinson, San Luis Obispo, Calif.

I just love how the writer expressed the intimacy of cards. I grew up playing different card games with my cousins. The smack talk, the competition and the shocking loss from not paying attention to the game. Also, the concept of being old enough to play at the table with adults. I was so pleased with myself the first time I was allowed to play 42 with my aunts and uncles.

Bunny Lee, Fort Worth

RE: AMY POEHLER

David Marchese interviewed the actress and comedian.



As a 40-something woman who tears through books as though each one is going to both save my life and let me down, I loved Poehler's analogy about aging and reading: like every decade is a new fat book that you don't really want to start but then you also don't want it to end. Thanks, Amy! Also, in full disclosure, just last night I said to my husband, "Why do we ever watch anything besides 'Parks and Rec'?" Amy: you are one of my long-time imaginary best friends. Hope you don't mind.
Courtney, Indiana

CORRECTION:

A poem by Nikky Finney on Feb. 28 omitted a word in the first line. The line should be: It is the pearl-blue peep of day.

'I absolutely loved being transported to a place of cards, friendship and so much love.'

The Keys sound pretty good right now.



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THE MUSIC ISSUE

A year ago, with venues going dark, musicians found themselves unmoored: from celebrated touring acts to orchestra pits and lobby pianists, they'd all just joined the many Americans whose jobs were vaporized by a pandemic. They also lost something beyond income — the stages they'd made their homes and the people who joined them there. As the guitarist Bill Frisell explains, over the past half-century he'd rarely gone a single day without playing music with other human beings. That changed last year.

We — you and I — lost the same thing. I've always happily repeated the usual commonplaces about music's power to connect people, but the past year has bludgeoned me with just how non-metaphorically, world-historically true they are. Music draws us into shared spaces, makes us move and think and feel together. This is the case with hymns, work songs, marching bands, house music in vast clubs, punk bands in humid basements, drunken people singing "Sweet Caroline" back at a guy with an acoustic guitar in a bar that sells 10-cent chicken wings. It must be one of the earliest things human beings ever did together. Music making is so central to how we experience community that when a pandemic starved us of that feeling, it was music we turned to in hopes of replacing it.

This special issue looks, as it does every year, at songs that reveal intriguing corners of our culture. Running alongside are six stories about how music guided us through the year itself. Music may have been locked out of the places where we once gathered to experience it, but it instantly flowed wherever else it could connect us. Just think back on one of the most striking images of last spring. When Italians were locked down in their apartments for weeks, what happened? Eventually they began stepping out onto their balconies — and *singing* to one another.
Nitsuh Abebe

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QUIÉN ME
LA PAGA'

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LA DOÑA

THE QUESTION
REPEATS ITSELF:
WHO WILL PAY?
BY CARINA DEL
VALLE SCHORSKE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN EDMONDS
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■ **The video for “Quién Me La Paga”** begins with Cecilia Peña-Govea testing the broth from a simmering pot of pinto beans, careful not to smudge her dark lipstick. We’re in her childhood home in Bernal Heights, San Francisco, where the floral carpet forgives festive spills and her father and sister crowd the couch on accordions. We follow her fluent swerve between stove and living-room dance floor as the first scratch of the güira sets the rhythm — cumbia! — then, when the chorus hits, the distinctive dembow of reggaeton, a decidedly millennial mash-up. This is the lifelong party that incubated her versatile, confident musicianship as the artist known as La Doña. Not long after, off-camera, the whole scene came to life again to celebrate her father’s retirement from 35 years in the city’s Department of Public Works — service sustained always by a parallel practice of virtuosic play.

No one knew it would be the last time they’d gather like that — passing spliffs, breathing in each other’s humid music — for a year and counting. The lost, forbidden pleasures are all immortalized onscreen. But even before the pandemic, her community of working musicians, public-school teachers, graffiti writers and

activists was in crisis. Privatization, accelerated by the tech industry, had left the city’s social safety net in tatters and pushed generations of Black and Latinx residents to the outskirts, where many worked three jobs to maintain a toehold. “Quién Me La Paga” alchemized the pressure of those conditions, La Doña’s voice ringing with lucid power: “*La vida, sí amor, me cuesta.*” Life — yes, my love — costs me. It’s expensive. It takes its toll.

La Doña’s first EP, “Algo Nuevo,” dropped on March 12, 2020, the same day Disneyland announced it would shut down. Her release party was scheduled for that night; she had already paid out the deposits, sold out the tickets. Her kitchen was filled with buckets of pink roses. The venue hadn’t canceled yet, but the call she had to make was clear, and in the hollow solitude that followed, she hung the roses from her ceiling to dry.

On the phone this February, La Doña told me how, in the early weeks of the pandemic, “we saw all the tech offices shut down, people leaving in droves.” The exodus seemed to play out the vision of cosmic justice she had articulated in another song from “Algo Nuevo,” “Cuando Se Van”: “*Sueño con terremotos/la ciudad pa’ nosotros.*” Maybe the disaster would chase out the opportunists, *las*

ratas que quieren comer nuestro pan. She felt almost guilty, “like oh, no, evil prophetic me” (her middle name is Cassandra, after all). As we now know, this abandonment of U.S. cities by the rich — I witnessed it in Manhattan, too — was not the harbinger of a new era of equitable distribution. The apocalyptic fantasy of “Cuando Se Van” yielded to the quotidian desperation of “Quién Me La Paga.” And La Doña’s careful plans for her triumphant debut blew away like a castle in the sky, “*un barrio compuesto de nubes.*”

The previous year, La Doña was one of 14 artists from around the world selected for the Foundry, the YouTube incubator that jump-started the careers of Rosalía, Dua Lipa and CHLOE x HALLE. Her face appeared on a billboard in Times Square; then, suddenly, Midtown was deserted. La Doña’s national tour — which was set to begin with South by Southwest — was canceled. She went from playing to crowds of 7,000 to livestreaming for a couple of hundred dollars and handling all the tech herself: sound, video, production, editing. La Doña’s management urged her to take on each and every virtual gig — for “exposure,” that dreaded euphemism for exploitation. To her great relief, she was still making money as a Latin-music analyst for Pandora and as a teacher with SF Jazz on Zoom, putting her home training in music theory to work.

But as an artist, she felt frozen — with anger, with fear and with the disoriented grief of losing the human context for her creativity. La Doña has been a live performer since she took up trumpet in her family’s *conjunto*, playing regional Mexican music, at age 7. Her songwriting first emerged through the call and response that generates invention within traditional Latin forms; even her recorded music, despite its electronic flourishes, fizzes with embodied, improvisational energy. She wrote “Quién Me La Paga” jamming with old friends, Camilo Landau and Ayla Dávila, commiserating over the city’s impossible rents and invoking the simple pleasures that sweeten the hustle: steaming coffee, cold beer, a fresh set of acrylics.

The song itself, of course, is another simple pleasure, especially the frenzied breakdown at the end: just drums and voices, Afro-Caribbean fundamentals, doubling down on the chorus: “*La vida me cuesta/¿quién me la paga?*” Under the pressure of repetition, the lyric phrase releases its full range of meanings. The question has developed a new resonance in the pandemic, now that mere survival has become a privilege available only to those who can afford to stay at home. “*Quién me la paga?*” “Who will pay?” Who will face responsibility for the lives sacrificed to profit? Who will give La Doña back her golden year? Repetition has a purpose that most “American pop music misses,” La Doña says. Repetition “makes the listener feel heard,” involves us all in fortifying the song’s power. In the oppressive privacy of my studio apartment, I sing along, until my individual anxiety starts to sound like a collective demand. ♦



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'CARDIGAN'



LONG, LONG AGO,
THIS COLLABORATION
MIGHT HAVE
FELT STRANGE.
BY STEVEN HYDEN

#2
#2

National; she's making music with them. The collaboration between Swift and the National's Aaron Dessner on her 2020 albums "Folklore" and "Evermore" has been so well received (and so thoroughly analyzed) that it's easy to forget that, just nine years ago, such a partnership would have overwhelmed our nation's music-critic think-piece resources. Is it possible that the war between the so-called pop-timism and rockism camps in culture journalism, waged in the pages of *The New York Times* and at every major music publication in the aughts and early 2010s, ended not with a bang but with two albums of musically low-key and lyrically incisive quarantine pop?

Listening to "Cardigan," a standout track from "Folklore," you can't quite tell where Swift ends and the National begins. Musically, the blend of strings, electronic beats and lonely piano strongly evokes the two most recent National albums — probably because Dessner originally composed the track for his bandmate Matt Berninger to sing. (Its working title was "Maple.") The lyrics, for their part, are all Swift, a familiar hybrid of recrimination and regret, painting a highly visual image of lovers tumbling in and out of bed while fumbling with charged emotions: "And when I felt like I was an old cardigan/Under someone's bed/You put me on and said I was your favorite." With her words set against that moody music, Swift is actually reminiscent of Berninger back when he was in his 30s and documenting drunken hookups in preppy clothes on his band's mid-aughts albums.

Surely someone out there is still bothered by this. Here is another "once upon a time" story: Long, long ago, indie bands once feared that if they didn't zealously guard their territory, their styles would be subsumed and co-opted by the mainstream. After "Folklore" and "Evermore," it's hard to deny that this is exactly what has happened, over the course of many years and during a changing of the generational guard that has made talk of selling out seem irrelevant. Most everything people used to consider indie music is now fully available for pop-star nation-states like Swift to adopt as an interesting, introspective guise for their latest batch of blockbuster songs, no different from the '80s-retro trappings of "1989." Just as the internet and streaming demolished every other form of stratification in music, the taste politics that once defined pop and indie have been flattened out of existence.

These generational shifts are an old story: Dessner's teaming up with Swift is no more scandalous, these days, than Elvis Presley's gyrating hips. But "Red" wasn't *that* long ago, was it? Of course, Swift was only 22 when that album was released. She's 31 now. Like so many of us before her, she eventually aged into the "I'm really into the National" period of her life. Only now, perhaps, has she realized that there is nothing about this period that is especially cool. ♦

■ **Once upon a time**, a few mistakes ago: It's 2012, and Taylor Swift is a country-music superstar trying to cross over into mainstream pop. Her big swing is her fourth album, "Red," and the first single is a snarky electro-folk tune called "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together." In the song, Swift calls out an ex by mocking his musical pretensions: "And you would hide away and find your peace of mind/With some indie record that's much cooler than mine."

Almost a decade later, this particular line might cause mild confusion among the younger generation: First of all, what's an indie record? And why would Swift suggest anything was cooler than she is?

More than any other pop star in her cohort, Swift has always paid close attention to the conversation about her. (See, for instance, 2017's "Reputation," Taylor Swift's concept album about Taylor Swift discourse.) That very quotable lyric from "Red" was, perhaps, a nod to an argument that was raging at the time, one about the supposedly outsize cultural capital afforded to hip,

obscure guitar bands versus mass-appeal pop stars. Subtly and quite effectively, Swift managed to position herself as the underdog in this battle — no matter how many platinum records and Grammys she had accumulated by her early 20s.

What nobody knew, back in 2012, was that the "cool indie record" archetype was about to be tossed in the dustbin of the early 21st century. The year after "Red" was released, a new generation of indie stars emerged — Haim, Lorde, the 1975 — that was aesthetically much closer to Swift's pop than anything in the rock underground. The year after that, Swift released "1989," her luxe version of an indie-pop record, selling more than 10 million copies worldwide. And yet her underdog image somehow persisted a little longer, especially after Pitchfork, the defining voice of turn-of-the-century musical hipsterdom, decided to review a full-album cover of "1989" by Ryan Adams and not the far more successful original.

These days, Taylor Swift is no longer being pitted in opposition to an indie act like the

■ **Pop music develops** through subverted expectations. The genre takes what we know well about its songs — the lyric about love, the hook after the verse — and reworks it over and over again, in endless pursuit of transcendent novelty. The feeling of pop is the rug pulled out from under, then immediately replaced, to much delight. Conjuring this rush demands a churn of new devices: a stranger kind of love or weirder verse, a dubstep drop or a wailing children’s choir. But soon, each new gimmick starts to feel familiar. Our ears grow jaded, build up a tolerance; the rush becomes more difficult to attain.

Enter pop country, a harder drug. Pop country is pop songwriting in a vise. Its set of motifs are even more constrained — beer, trucks, heterosexual love — and as a result a lyricist has to work twice as hard to surprise us. Cross-genre innovations arrive slowly, if at all. This limited sonic vocabulary is why some people say it’s a hack genre, and in the worst cases they’re probably right. But constraints breed creativity too, and in the best cases, a pop-country song sets the known and the unknown in perfect opposition. The things that feel rote are reborn to inspire.

Sam Hunt’s “Hard to Forget,” released in February last year, is an ideal specimen. The song

pushes off from land with a glitched-out sample of Webb Pierce’s 1953 honky-tonk hit “There Stands the Glass”; before we can find our bearings, it contorts itself again into a pseudo-reggae groove. Here we’re left to wonder if the song has veered off course, drifting too far into post-modern weirdness. But then Hunt’s voice, with its middling swag, arrives just in time to bring us back to solid ground. Disorder is reordered; the status quo restored. We sigh in relief: It’s just a classic breakup song!

Next we follow Hunt as he floats through daily life, taunted by his ambient desire for an ex. In this first verse, we don’t meet the girl, but the aching possibility of her lurks beneath even the most banal errands. “I saw your sister at work, I saw your mama at church, I’m pretty sure I saw your car at the mall,” he sings. “I see your face in the clouds, I smell your perfume in crowds, I swear your number’s all my phone wants to call.” The pious emblems of mama and church are undermined by the profane mall parking lot; the face in the clouds and the perfume in crowds are redeemed by the everyday cheapness of the cellphone. Hunt, like all good pop-country lyricists, knows how to play a cliché to his advantage — upending an old saw only to circle back and remind us of the density of meaning

it contains. How human it is to yearn in a way that so many others have already yearned. He savors the pleasant paranoia of a breakup: the fearful desire to run into your ex, the question of whether she longs for it, too.

By the time the two characters finally collide, we’re in the chorus. As Hunt studies the girl across the room, a hook with a frenzy of broken-down wordplay perfectly mirrors his tangled train of thought: “You’ve got a cold heart and the cold hard truth, I got a bottle of whiskey but I’ve got no proof, that you showed up tonight in that dress just to mess with my head.” Hunt wonders if she’s playing “hard to forget” — another rehabilitated cliché. In the final verse, she tells him to leave a pile of her things out on the porch swing, but she never picks them up. Is it a sign she wants him back? We don’t find out. Without his saying it, we’re left with a sense that later that night he’ll stare at his phone, awaiting her text.

Until the pandemic, the stuff of daily life — drinking beer, finding love, clocking in, breaking up — could feel like just going through the motions. Hunt’s song reminds us there is drama everywhere. What I wouldn’t give, these days, to run into an ex in the mall parking lot while I’m out running errands. ♦

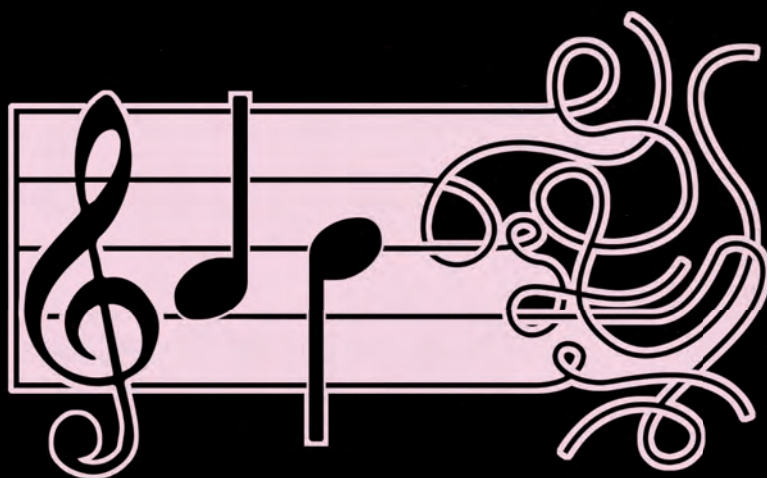


**POP COUNTRY IS POP
SONGWRITING IN A VISE.
BY JAMIE LAUREN KEILES**

“HARD TO FORGET”



**SAM HUNT
SAM HUNT
SAM HUNT
SAM HUNT
SAM HUNT
SAM HUNT**



THE NOISE MADE BY PEOPLE

One year, I searched out silence. The next, all I wanted was the sound of a crowd.
By Mike Powell

In August 2019, I traveled to the northwest corner of Washington's Olympic Peninsula to look for a place called One Square Inch of Silence. The site — marked by a small red stone set on a log deep within the Hoh Rainforest — was originally staked out by the acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, who classified it as one of the most measurably quiet places in the country. "Silence," for Hempton, is defined by the absence of human-generated sound; he has been at the heels of airlines over their flight paths for decades.

At the time, I fetishized quiet, and the cultivation of quiet, as a kind of armature against an increasingly noisy world. But I was also looking for an answer to a question. What that question was, I couldn't tell you, nor could I say whether I got an answer. These pursuits always have a doglike quality to them: You work yourself up, wear yourself out and move on unwittingly to the next bone.

The site was a little hard to find, especially without cell service to track my GPS coordinates, and the directions I printed out from Hempton's website — "follow the path over downed trees," "walk along a tree root that spans a wet, muddy area" — were vague. I felt like a young wizard set on a quest by a harsh but transformative teacher. Right as I was about to give up, I saw it: a red stone on a log, just like the picture.

For Hempton, going into the woods isn't just about leaving one world but entering another. This is not a metaphor. Nature has a way of making you feel simple and expendable, but it also has a way of turning you inward. I'd like to say that I loved the woods themselves, but my motivation was primarily internal: I went into the woods because I wanted to hear nature, because in nature, I thought I might be able to hear myself.

Over the past year, though, I've been listening to music that helps me feel as if the self doesn't matter that much to begin with. Disco, funk, batucada drumming and New Orleans brass bands — the more people working in unison, the better. I've had an especially good time listening to new hardcore and punk bands on Bandcamp: noisy, short things that work my brain like steel wool and leave me riveted.

The beauty of the music isn't just its aggression or physicality,

but the way it shakes you out of yourself. It's hard to consider your problems when someone is screaming at you, and I suspect it's hard for the person screaming, too. In the face of a self-care culture that continually drives us inward, great hardcore — and a lot of great brass-band music, and great disco, too — conjure a shared space where our personal journeys and sensitivities don't matter so much as the collective one. There's no "I" in the spirit of Chic's "Good Times," but there is an ecstatic "we," and plenty of people to sing it. And if hardcore bands play three ugly chords, it's not because they don't know four, but because the compositional substance of their music is secondary to the people it glues together.

It's not that I've renounced solitude, only that the fruits I used to harvest from it seem out of season and hard to stomach. I think of Ella Fitzgerald singing "Don't Fence Me In" — "Let me be by myself in the evening breeze/Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees," a hymn to that American promise of freedom through individuality — and suddenly feel agoraphobic and sad. I used to avoid noise, and the busy, self-subsuming experiences it seemed to represent; now I couldn't find it if I wanted to.

Some days, the wait feels manageable. Other days, I feel as if my

heart's on ice and I'm just trying to keep it pumping until it's safe to put it back in. In the interim, I've found ways to cope. The absurdity of a 38-year-old man riding his bike down an empty street blasting "Good Times" isn't lost on me. Nor is the idea of that same man trying to keep up with all the overlapping vocals in George Clinton's "Atomic Dog" in a Safeway parking lot while his children stare from the back seat. But I hope it isn't lost on whoever may have seen me, either: I did it to be seen, and to serve in part as a place-holder for a bigger, wilder experience still on hold. I trust that whatever connection might come from that is a good one.

At some point during the long, numbing stretch of time that characterized most of last year, a friend reached out to reminisce about going to see a group of samba musicians on the street in São Paulo, Brazil. The musicians were crowded around a table cluttered with beer cans and plastic cups, with the audience pressing in around them, singing and dancing. It wasn't that you couldn't tell the difference between the audience and the performers, only that whatever word you used to describe it would have to apply not just to one or the other but to the relationship between the two. Colloquially, the gathering is called a *roda*: a circle, but, more literally, a wheel, something that keeps turning.

I remember trying to explain to a couple of Brazilians in the crowd that my wife and I didn't know the gender of our soon-to-be-born child. They thought I meant we were going to let the newborn decide on its own. How fantastic, they cheered. How progressive, how American! No, I started to explain — I mean, if the child did that at some point, that would be fine, but I only meant we'd told the doctor we would find out when the child was born. But I stopped myself, because the rain was falling lightly, and someone's beer was empty, and nothing I could say felt nearly as important as the music, and the fact that we were all there to hear it. ♦

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'YOU TURN INTO AN ADULT AND
REALIZE NO ONE CARES.'
INTERVIEW BY DAVID MARCHESI

■ **Phoebe Bridgers's "Kyoto"** is a song that sounds airborne — and not just because the lyrics refer to planes. It begins with a synthesizer wafting a gentle melodic line. Drums stir accents on the two and four. Bridgers floats in, singing the simple verse melody. The mood is wistful, drifting. A few bars pass before a revving electric guitar and bass enter. The drums grow bolder. Then comes the chorus, and "Kyoto" starts to soar: Bridgers rises in register, singing in high harmony with herself. A trumpet rings out atop chiming guitar and keyboard. We're flying. (And so is Bridgers in the song's trippy video.) But listen to what the singer is telling you. She's on tour in Japan, too unsettled to take in the singularly beautiful city after which the song is named. Instead she's stuck on someone. She sings about a phone call she got — he said he was getting sober. Her little brother got a call, too, to wish him a happy birthday — 10 days off, but points for trying. The lyrics pull down while the music crests and crests. As "Kyoto" closes, Bridgers is belting, "I'm a liar." Though you might think you heard, as I initially did, "I'm alive." Then again, it's never a mistake to hear life in Bridgers's music, melancholy as it may be.

Is it any wonder that "Punisher," the album from which "Kyoto" comes and that helped Bridgers earn four Grammy nominations, was such a comfort to so many during these awful last 12 months? Haven't we all, in our own way, been desperately trying to make our sinking feelings float? "There's this stamp that I can put on bad things," says Bridgers, a 26-year-old Angeleno. "*Got a song out of it.* It's weird, but, wow, that's my job."

You've said elsewhere that one of your difficulties in life is feeling unable to experience things in the moment. That seems connected to your lyrical sensibility, which has this striking specificity but also a sense of remove. I'm wondering if you worry about the source of your gift also being what prevents your happiness. You've tapped into the thing that I think about every day. I spend

hundreds of dollars on therapy a week so that I can fix that problem. I've also monetized it by using it to write songs, so it's a complex thing. I'd love to inch closer to feeling good things and bad things more in the moment, but when I sit down to write, I just can't be super emotionally activated. It takes me years to write about something.

So how did you arrive at "Kyoto"? Word vomit. I do this thing when I feel frustrated where I just say what's on the top of my head or rhyme random stuff. The first couple lyrics of the song came out like that. Then I was like, I can't just talk about addiction issues. It has to be more interesting than that. I should tell you more context about my relationship with my dad. Marshall Vore wrote the song with me because I was struggling with this thing we call "dumpster dads." He and I have a lot of shared experiences, whether it's abandonment or gaslighting. And Marshall was like, everybody's dumpster dad gets them to drive way too early. I thought: That's funny. I'll put that in there. So the truck bit in the song was, I thought, made up. Then I was driving in Pasadena and had a recovered memory of driving my dad's truck when I was a child — this was *after* we finished the song. So the emotional distance goes even further than a mind-set that I need to get into to write. It's natural for me.

The detail in your lyrics and even your openness on Twitter and in interviews encourages the idea that there's a one-to-one relationship between you and the persona in your songs. Is there any space between the two? No. I can only really write from my perspective. That was one of the things that was mind-blowing about seeing the way that Conor Oberst wrote when we were working on our record ["Better Oblivion Community Center," from 2019]. He'd go, What would it be like to be this person? What would you think about and do? I'm not that creative. I only have my experience to go on. But there are little bends in the truth: I wrote a song called "Would You Rather" on my first record ["Stranger in the Alps," from 2017] about my brother and domestic violence

and when my house caught on fire when I was 19. My mother was hurt in the fire, and everyone was psychologically freaked out. One of the cops wondered if my brother had done it, but he had no part in it. In the song I say that he would prefer to drown than go up in flames. Then a couple of years ago my brother said, "I definitely prefer fire, so I don't know why you said that." [Laughs.] He's hilarious.

It seems like such an emotional minefield to write about your family. Sometimes I think, Why did I open that up? I also have this tendency interpersonally — I'm the anxious-avoidant attachment type. I'll talk to my therapist or my mom about how upset I am about something somebody did, and the logical conclusion is, Well, you should tell that person. Then I'd have to resolve it, when what I want is to exile them from my life. But it's common to not have black-and-white feelings about your family, and it's nice to talk to people who've had similar experiences. It makes me feel less alone, and I get more of those experiences from sharing my own. But I don't like when my family hears it.

I know that the characters in the song are composites, but what did your dad think of "Kyoto"? We started talking again during Covid. I'd forgotten how much we have in common. He's very political, and it's rad. I have so many friends who lost contact with family over politics, and with my dad it was the opposite. That was cool. But we didn't talk about "Kyoto." Then the Grammy nominations came out, and we talked on the phone, and as a joke he was like, "You're welcome" — for the song. It was kind of nice. I don't know. There are some things that I don't want to talk about with anybody who's not my therapist or my friends, but on a basic level hearing that was not quite closure, but it was definitely OK.

Your dad's comment about "Kyoto" aside, what's been most interesting about the process of being nominated for a handful of Grammys? My mom used to say life isn't a competition, but it feels good to win. That's exactly what it is. I made something that I like, and it's cool that people have shone a light on it. It's also been nice for my family to realize that I have a real job. They thought I was busking on the street until like two months ago.

I know that your mom has started doing stand-up. Have you seen her perform? Oh, yeah. When she told me she was taking a comedy class — concerning. Then she invited me to go see her — *so* concerning. I don't drink that much, but I ordered five drinks and was shwasted by the time she came onstage. And she *crushed* it. Went to see her the next time, totally dry, she was still funny as [expletive]. It was a relief. Like if you're dating someone and they start writing poetry, you have to be like, "Oh, cool." But this was my *mom*. She's always been hilarious, but I was nervous.

Did she tell jokes about you? Yeah. There was one involving my sending her a picture when I thought I had an S.T.D. when I was a teenager.

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You got a little of your own medicine. Totally. I gave her permission to joke about me, too. I was like, I've definitely subjected *you* to a weird spotlight.

Speaking of: There was a Spotify billboard in L.A. featuring you that had a tagline about hitting the road with a guitar — what'd it say? "Hitting the road with six strings and a U.T.I."

Right. It made me wonder, if that line got approved, what got rejected? They all came from my tweets. But there was one that was, "I was sexually active before I stopped wetting the bed." Which, if you flip it, sounds like I was assaulted when I was a kid. But the truth is that the last time I wet the bed I was like 20. It runs in my family. What I loved is that the person I was dating at the time — I did it, and I thought, Are you kidding me? I woke them up and was like, "I'm really sorry but I totally wet the bed." And they were like: "I'm tired. I'm going to just scoot over." Then I never did it again. It was like a magical fairytale solution. All I needed was acceptance and someone who didn't give a [expletive] and the problem was solved. You look back at what you obsessed about when you were younger, the stuff that made you go, "I would evaporate if anybody ever knew," and then you turn into an adult and

realize no one cares. Your world is biggest to you. Which is good to remember.

How do you see the interplay between your public profile and your music? Because in certain corners of social media, you've become almost the personification of a certain kind of jokey sad-girl aesthetic. I could imagine your not wanting that to detract from your music. I don't know. There is definitely a millennial sense of humor that I've been guilty of that's, like, "I'm in bed all day because I'm so depressed; Ben and Jerry are my boyfriends." And I was trying to go back on Instagram and delete all my old VSCO Cam white-border photos. You know, I saw a TikTok the other day that said: "On my way to 2014. Need anything?" and it was black and white and the girl was wearing a hat and skinny jeans and matte-leather jacket and black nail polish. Then I go look at *my* raccoon makeup from 2014 — that's the element that is disturbing to me. You don't want to become dated. But hopefully the way to solve that is to constantly grow and not become a cartoon of myself; be self-aware and surround yourself with people who don't laugh at everything you say and tell you that you're a god.

Have you been tempted to do that? No. I mean, yeah, you meet a fan on the street, you say

something unfunny and they go, *Ha ha ha ha ha ha!* Like, I can see how I could be addicted to that. **After the allegations of Marilyn Manson's abuse came out, you tweeted about a weird experience you had with him. Can you fill in that story? How was it that you wound up at his house?** He was trying out for a TV show that my friend's dad was working on, and my friend's dad was like, "I know you're a big fan, come with us to meet him." So I went with two of my best friends. One of them is my guitar player, Harrison. I think I was 18. I am not a victim of his, so I'm not trying to take up space, but I did want to say I witnessed him at his *best*, and he made tons of rape jokes, used the N-word, joked about swastikas. There was a beanbag chair that he had for me to sit on, and he was like, "I've [expletive] so many people in that beanbag chair." I hated all the comments that were like, "What did you expect from Marilyn Manson?" I expect the world. But yeah, as much as you read about this kind of stuff, somehow it still shocks me. **Do you feel an expectation that you must be active on social media?** Well, it's easy to romanticize people with depression or even romanticize yourself and think, The darkest parts of me are what make me an artist, when you don't have to be abusive or depressed or addicted to make great art. I like using social media to strip back that idea of the depressed artist. But I do get self-conscious of my whole Twitter being Phoebe Bridgers jokes. I want to have a healthier relationship with social media than [expletive]-posting all day about myself.

What you might do differently? I have a fantasy of eventually deleting it.

Don't we all. Yeah. But my connection with fans — I have a friend, Austin, whom I met because he was a yellow-haired kid in the crowd at my shows. I recognized his face on Twitter: He D.M.'d me asking if I wanted to get lunch at a vegan zombie-themed burger restaurant, and I was like, Absolutely I do. The real thing about social media is the direct contact with fans. That can be scary when someone has no boundaries, but I've met so many friends through it.

I apologize in advance for this question, which is going to sound so corny: Did having such a career-validating year in 2020 change your feelings about yourself? Because people have fantasies about external success having a direct positive bearing on internal happiness. Yes, it did. People who want to make that some tagline for life — "Success doesn't affect your happiness" and "Money isn't everything" — I think those people were probably raised with money. My first three tours, I was in a Prius that I bought when I was 18, going to Taco Bell every day and feeling kind of [expletive]. Now I get to have a latte whenever I want and make art that people will actually listen to. You know, it's worked out. ♦

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations. A longer version is online at [nytimes.com/magazine](https://www.nytimes.com/magazine).

■ **The year 2020** was many things, but it was not the year of sex. Living under the constant threat of contagion has a way of killing your libido. And yet despite dropping in the midst of a summer defined by the spectacle of Black death, a song devoted to Black desire debuted at No. 1 and collected a record-breaking 93 million streams in the United States in its first week of release. Warm-weather anthems score the juiciest parts of summer; but there were none of the usual parties last year, only protests. Yet “WAP” didn’t ask us to set down our unrest — it asked us to channel it into a different outlet: sexual liberation.

Right away, the song puts you on notice: *There’s some whores in this house*. The repetitive chant a sample from a classic Baltimore club track by Frank Ski. It isn’t an accusation — it’s a declaration, and everyone within earshot is included. No sluts will be shamed here, only celebrated. For the next few minutes, you have a free pass to bend over, drop it or put four on the floor without judgment.

“WAP” is the audio equivalent of an extravagant sundae. As artists, Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B are already expert practitioners of decadent maximalism. More is more when it comes to their looks, their lyrics, their social media presence. “WAP” functions like a double dog dare, both artists challenging themselves to see how much further they can go. Ayo N Keyz, the producers, kept the spine of the track as austere as possible, letting it be the spoon that Meg and Cardi use to dish up as many metaphors for pleasure as they can: Macaroni in a pot! Punani Dasani! Swipe your nose like a credit card! It’s carnal, and prudery is the carnage. Rappers bragging about their sexual prowess is an entire genre; but “WAP” inverts the usual power dynamic. It’s a list of what they need to get aroused, and if you don’t have the qualifications, don’t bother applying.

So much of pop culture tells us that sex is brief, clean and tidy and centers the male orgasm as the ultimate, climatic act. “WAP” dismisses all of this,

encouraging all of us to imagine our dirtiest fantasies. Meg’s brilliant “switch my wigs, make him feel like he’s cheating” invites you to think about role play, and the line “you can’t hurt my feelings, but I like pain” in her Texas twang reminds you of flirtations with B.D.S.M. Cardi’s gritting her teeth and telling you to give it “everything you got” makes you wonder just how much *you’ve* got to give someone.

The effect was seismic. The song became the first-ever female rap collaboration to reach No. 1 on Spotify, proving that wildfires and drastic weather swings aren’t the only natural disasters threatening our environment: Black women well versed in their agency and consent are apparently a threat, too. The song immediately sparked outrage: Men whined in interviews about its moral bankruptcy — nothing more than thinly veiled respectability politics meant to police Black women’s sexual appetites — and conservatives lectured about reasonable amounts of bodily secretions (apparently anything needing a bucket and a mop was too much — but tell that to the woman I once overheard say her nickname was WetJet).

As a song, “WAP” is relentless. No mortal has the stamina to withstand the grind of the beat and lyrics for more than a few listens. Videos usually extend the life cycle of a track, but the song’s official video, even with golden breasts spurting water and Meg and Cardi in fishnets splashing around in a shallow pool, seemed to have the opposite effect — probably because of a disruptively long Kylie Jenner cameo. TikTok picked up the baton. The audio tags for “WAP” were among the most popular on the app in 2020. Most of the energy went toward trying the acrobatic choreography created for the song by Brian Esperon, a dancer in Guam, which included several high kicks and spins and a full-bodied dry-hump on the floor. There were videos of people playing WAP for their parents and filming their shock (and in some cases, delight). There were entire subcategories of memes spun off from the drippiest lines, with people extolling their own particular pleasures.

Songs, especially summer hits, are time capsules for moments we want to remember. As much as “WAP” talked about sex, it felt most powerful as a reminder of being embodied enough to want to have it. The song is an exercise in somatics: You feel it lighting up your body. In “Pleasure Activism,” Adrienne Maree Brown, a scholar and activist, reminds us that this is the point of life; humans are drawn to feeling good. There’s no shame in it. Finding moments for “the aliveness and awakening, the gratitude and humility, the joy and celebration of being miraculous” are necessary respites, and especially needed sustain the work of liberation movements that span decades. “WAP” came exactly when we needed it: a reason to pause and celebrate the very things that make us human, before picking up our signs again and heading back out into the streets. ♦



SHOWSTOPPER

When venues went dark, performers lost a livelihood — and a way of life. By Dessa

On March 8, 2020, I received instructions from a tour manager for an upcoming run: Pack light; don't forget your passport; and DON'T BRING GUNS OR DRUGS WE ARE GOING TO CANADA. I'd been earning a living as a musician for over a decade, and I had a decent schedule lined up for the year: theater gigs up the East Coast, some high-buck private events and — most exciting — a tour through China that included several cities I'd never heard of. I had to pull up a map on my laptop to find the one called Wuhan.

Musicians like me are not famous-famous. Before the pandemic, we might have been stopped at Target for a selfie, but nobody from TMZ was waiting in the parking lot. Streaming has made music easy to find but hard to sell. To make money, we toured. A mailing address was where we did laundry, but our seat in the van was the pocket of space in which we spent half our waking hours some months. We earned our keep in performance fees and at the merch table, where we stood after shows, nursing drinks and signing screen-printed posters or limited-edition LPs pressed in colored vinyl. Often the swag wasn't as enticing as the *experience* of buying it. Nobody rolls up to a lemonade stand dying of thirst; they pull over for the kid and the tackle box of dollar bills. Indie music is much the same, a high-touch industry. Of course, as the coronavirus swept over the world, the last thing you'd want is someone touching you.

By March 12, the tour manager emailed to pull the plug. More cancellations followed. A few thousand dollars of contracts went bust, then \$10,000, then \$40,000. Then all of them. The calendar went white.

The skill I'd honed for most of my adult life — performing live to a room full of people — was no longer useful. I was suddenly a pay phone: obsolete, however fondly regarded. To stay connected to listeners, I started a weekly Instagram Live series called "Show of Force Majeure." Using a scrap of red fabric and a chopstick, I made a tiny theater curtain to hold in front of my iPhone, and I'd whisk it up to begin the performance. And in that moment, I could feel a low dose of the old preshow adrenaline.

But after it ended, I was in the quiet of my apartment again. My Before life had been dotted with constant, minor fires — a scramble to soundcheck after a snowstorm closed the roads; a last-minute backstage press request; drums lost in transit. I'd acclimated to the urgency, and to slow down so suddenly was a jolt, like the stumbling step off a moving walkway. The music business was stressful, but it also felt purposeful. My job hadn't just been the part of my life that paid the bills; it was the organizing principle. It accounted for my weird sleep schedule and far-flung friends; it shaped my understanding of myself and my place in the world. I'd poured most of my life into my work. And without that vessel to contain it, I wasn't sure how to stop my life from just puddling on the counter.

Passing under a bridge on a walk last fall, the echo of my footfalls stopped me — *reverb*. I used to spend so much time in rooms large enough to echo. I remember lying on my back, alone onstage at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis before a show, clapping once to ring the room like a bell. My cousin Mikey, also a musician, used to work at a Brooklyn venue that had once been a mayonnaise factory. An empty giant metal storage vat was suspended over the stage. One night, drunk with friends, we climbed up the metal ladder that led inside. The acoustics were otherworldly, long, layered reflections. Somebody started singing "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," and we all joined. Voices in harmony behave like liquid flocks of starlings, individuals discernible but most remarkable as part of the airborne formation, fanning then contracting — a cellular structure at monumental scale. Tiny flakes tumbled down, presumably ancient mayonnaise, but in the flashlights of our cellphones, it looked like snow, and the melodies in suspension made it beautiful.

Singing with other people is dangerous now. I can still harmonize with myself, layering recordings in my bedroom closet. And it's still lovely, at least to my ear. But it's dancing alone.

There is no analogous alternative to live performance. Nothing since

last March has approached the feeling of being midset during a good show. Lightning doesn't strike every night, but when it does, my mind works differently: My attention becomes panoramic, even prismatic, capable of attending to the scrolling lyrics of the song I am delivering, the worrisome splintering of my drummer's right stick, the security guard chatting up the handsome barback and the girl with a flask in the second row, which I plan to lift out of her hand and drink from in the instrumental break after the chorus — to a burst of guaranteed applause. I know how far my left arm can be extended before my fingers leave the light; I know the dude in the hat is trying to snag my set list as a souvenir for his girlfriend, and with the toe of my boot, I push it toward him — I can cheat off the drummer's when I walk over to his riser for a bit of banter after this song ends, a break we both know is designed to allow him the moment to replace his right stick.

Concerts are back in Wuhan. I've seen the photos online: blue lights hitting the haze of synthetic fog and steaming bodies. For now, I mumble new lyrics on long walks, my drummer practices in his attic and I presume that all of us — the barback and the guard, the girl and her flask, the couple in the front row — wait for the sign that it's safe to take our places, for the cue to count us all back in. ♦



COLLEEN

(INTRO)

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SULLIVAN

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WITH INTIMACY OUT OF REACH, THERE'S ALWAYS SELF-EXAMINATION.

BY NIELA ORR

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN EDMONDS
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■ **I'd been dating** a man long-distance for only a few months, and I yearned to find out if the text jokes, voice notes, FaceTime dates and phone calls would translate into physical attraction — something I had little chance to explore over the last year. Then, in February, the singer Jazmine Sullivan's EP "Heaux Tales" arrived. In a period when many of us have had little bodily contact, the way this EP's lead track, "Bodies (Intro)," fixates on the erotic feels visceral.

While "Bodies" is a sensuous song, its sexiness is not the point. Sullivan spins a tale about a woman trying to stop a cycle of intoxicated hookups — "I keep on piling up bodies on bodies on bodies," she sings. The narrator is examining herself, demanding that she relinquish bad habits. Sullivan conjures a protagonist who narrowly escapes from palpable danger; downs dubious cocktails; experiences disembodied trips into altered states of feeling; and frantically looks for her underwear in unfamiliar apartments. "You don't know who you went home with again/Was he a friend, or a friend of a friend?" she asks. Dislocated and disassociated as she is, she can't find any answers.

Whether or not she's singing about romantic entanglement, Sullivan, who is 33, makes music about the intersection between autonomy and enmeshment, fierceness and vulnerability; the dichotomy was established in the titles of her first two albums, "Fearless" (2008) and "Love Me Back" (2010). After taking a break from music, in 2015 she released her third album, "Reality Show," which uses reality television as a metaphor for the pressures of contemporary life, characterized by surveillance and amplified drama.

In moving from "Reality Show" to "Heaux Tales," Sullivan has burrowed deeper into the psychological costs of these pressures. "Bodies"

sets the tone: It's about the compass of one woman's consciousness and the discomfiting places it has led her. Messier than the songs that are promoted to radio and streaming playlists, this track is searching, enigmatic and inward-facing. In jams like "Pick Up Your Feelings," Sullivan's narrators are always certain; they know where to place blame. "Bodies" is more like an existential mystery. "Let me rewind," Sullivan warbles, her delivery wobbly and sludgy like a tape deck with a dying battery. Here, Sullivan's subject isn't busting out windows. She's looking into them, reflecting and navigating the uncertainty found there.

The guy and I didn't work out. We were each other's rebounds, and the distance had inflated my sense of what was possible in the relationship. What I really needed was to check in with myself. "Bodies" helped me to re-examine my psyche in the manner of the song's narrator. In some ways I am not like her. That is both for better — I always know where I wake up — and for worse — I rarely let anyone in. But like her, I was using romance to forestall an emotional reckoning.

The meditation app I use tells me to do a body scan, to feel the weight of myself on my sofa as I recline. That impression is not the same as someone's muscled torso against my belly — the press of it — and yet it feels somehow closer than that. "Bodies" is ultimately about the brain, where we wake up first. In the end, the intimacy that Sullivan's narrator seeks may be with herself. "What did I have in my cup?" she asks. The question of whether someone had spiked her drink, or if the alcohol was just too strong for her, leads to a different kind of personal outpouring. She seems to be raising the kinds of questions you ask during an intense stare-down with yourself in the mirror: *What is inside of me?* and *What do I really want?* ♦

■ **To begin wrapping** your mind around Jacob Collier, the wizardly English singer-songwriter-arranger-producer, the place to start is not a recording or a music video or a concert. You need to check out a lecture. On the internet, you can find dozens of examples of Collier in professorial mode, or as professorial as it gets for a guy whose wardrobe leans to rainbow-colored Crocs and hats with ears. There are videos of him conducting master classes at the Berklee College of Music and the University of Southern California. There are clips of him explicating the harmonic structure of Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke." There are the Logic Breakdown Sessions, in which he examines his own music at the molecular level, walking step by step through the construction of his songs. Collier is a star who has toured the world and won four Grammys — he is nominated for three more in 2021, including Album of the Year — yet he is most in his element when he faces a lecture-hall audience or a laptop camera and plumbs the deeps of music theory, holding forth on plagal cadences, time signatures in Bulgarian folk music and his own esoteric innovations, such as the continually modulating musical scale he has named the Super-Ultra-Hyper-Mega-Meta-Lydian.

Collier is 26, but with his baby face and string-bean limbs, he looks little different than he did nearly a decade ago, when videos showcasing his virtuosity first circulated online. One was a cover of Stevie Wonder's "Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing," featuring Collier on keyboards, guitar, bouzouki, double bass and percussion. His one-man-band skills were outrageous. (He studied in prestigious conservatories and was raised in a musical household.) But what really stood out was the song's harmonic intricacy: a multi-tracked chorale of Colliers, swerving through jazzy extensions and gnarly near-dissonances that resolved in surprising ways. The video caught the attention of Quincy Jones, who signed the teenager to a management deal. Four albums have followed, including the current Grammy nominee, "Djesse Vol. 3" — Collier's most pop-facing record, in which he strives to marry the heady stuff of those master classes with the kind of R.&B. that makes hits.

The most striking attempt is "Sleeping on My Dreams," which Collier has called his favorite track on the album. It is, seemingly, a song about a breakup: "Now the time has come for me to admit/I don't think I could be your line of best fit," Collier sings, a lyric that doesn't quite trip off the tongue. But like all his songs, it is also about music itself, a formal exercise that tests how many sounds and ideas one pop recording can bear. There are electronic bleats and snatches of funk guitar. There is pop-soul crooning and weird vocal harmonies that swoop across the stereo spectrum. There is a psychedelic prechorus and a buoyant R.&B. chorus, the sturdiest groove Collier has concocted. He sang and played every note; when he performed the song on "The Late

'SULLIVAN MAKES MUSIC ABOUT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ENMESHMENT, FIERCENESS AND VULNERABILITY.'

'SULLIVAN MAKES MUSIC ABOUT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ENMESHMENT, FIERCENESS

A STAGGERING MUSICAL
PRODIGY AND HIS STRANGELY
MUNDANE SONGS.
BY JODY ROSEN

'SLEEPING ON MY DREAMS'



#7

JACOB COLLIER JACOB COL
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JACOB COLLIER JACOB COL

Late Show With James Cordon” in January, he raced between instruments, tapping at a vibraphone, playing kick drum and piano simultaneously and fingering the Harmonizer, an instrument designed for him by an M.I.T. grad student. The performance was typical Collier: a kind of epic humblebrag, a casual display of genius.

To call Collier a genius is not exactly a critical judgment. It’s a statement of the obvious. When Jason King, the chairman of the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University, asked the jazz piano great Herbie Hancock for a point of comparison to Collier, in terms of talent, Hancock replied, “Maybe Stravinsky?” Musicians and musicologists have been floored by Collier’s harmonic explorations, like the brain-bending modulation from the key of E to that of “G½ sharp” in his 2016 rendition of “In the Bleak Midwinter.” He revels in whimsical, high-degree-of-difficulty challenges. On New Year’s Day, he posted an Instagram video of himself playing a raucous keyboard solo designed so that the notes, as they appeared in his recording software, spelled out “HAPPY 2021.”

But do great gifts necessarily yield good songs? There has always been a tension in music, especially in pop, between technical fluency and the more nebulous qualities — style, wit, magnetism,

emotional pull — that make a performer captivating. Some musicians have it all. Some are audibly blessed with more of one gift than another. Then there are those for whom technical prowess seems almost like an impediment to creating music that speaks to large audiences.

Collier is a peculiar case: a wunderkind whose objectively groundbreaking music can strike listeners as unremarkable, even dull. Part of the issue is his voice. He has perfect pitch and astonishing range, but in pop music, technique is far less crucial than personality, expressiveness, “vibe.” For a musician so in-the-pocket, his singing also has surprisingly little rhythmic feel, a deficiency you can hear in the verses of “Sleeping on My Dreams,” where he stumbles over syncopations. The pallor of his tone, and the sheer volume of *stuff* he attempts to cram into each measure, give the song a lead-footed feeling. It lumbers when it should strut.

At least that’s the way I hear it. Others, more steeped in theory, may experience an entirely different song. This is the paradox of Jacob Collier. During a 2017 master class in Buenos Aires, he told the audience that hardly any songs on his forthcoming album were “in A440” — that is, in standard pitch. “You can be more emotional if a key is in a different place,” he exulted.

This is undoubtedly true if, like Collier, you are among the fraction of people with perfect pitch. For those who can follow along, his moonshot journeys into new realms of pitch, temperament and microtonality are thrilling. But Collier has chosen to work in pop, where communication between artists and audiences takes place on an earthier plane. Some of his greatest feats may not even register with lay listeners, even as a vague intimation or emotion.

For many of us, the best way to appreciate Collier’s songs is to hear him talk about them. This is no insult: His eloquent, often hilarious musical exegeses are more fun than most people’s music, one of the more intellectually gratifying ways I know to kill time online. In the Logic Session Breakdown for “Sleeping on My Dreams,” he discusses the song’s 331 tracks, highlighting the kick drum “shrugs,” the beats he tapped on a Grammy Award trophy (“Grammys do make good *agogo* bells”) and the dozens of layers of vocal and instrumental harmonies. Watching and listening as he turns his song inside out, you have an oddly inverted experience of music appreciation: The sum of the parts appears far greater than the whole, and the sturdiness and beauty of the underlying architecture shines through. Someday, Collier’s music may catch up with his musicology. ♦

■ **To pour yourself** into the premade vessel of a pop song is to join an emotional experience that is broad and communal and yet, somehow, utterly personalized. It can make you feel more and less like yourself at the same time, serving as either a fantasy of escape or a journey of self-actualization. Every pop song embodies this divide at some subliminal level, but few celebrate it like “Immaterial,” a buoyant 3-minute-53-second unit of taffylike joy from the Scottish indie musician and producer Sophie, whose 2018 album, “The Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides,” began to climb the charts again in February following her untimely accidental death.

Sophie’s work helped define hyperpop, a playful genre that exulted in using the most garish, artificial and derided elements of pop as the raw material for artsy, rave-y innovation. With its vivid amalgamation of bouncy beats, anthemic pop hooks and splashy, rubbery sonic textures, “Immaterial” could as easily be the theme song to a children’s cartoon as an offbeat club hit. The track is a high-energy maximalist landscape with all peaks and no valleys: a choir of androgynous voices shouting “Immaterial girls, immaterial boys” in a cheeky reversal of Madonna’s 1980s mantra, while soaring, ethereal vocal hooks wail over a brash, candy-colored synth line that wouldn’t be out of place in a shopping-mall video arcade. It’s the sound of a Dance Dance Revolution machine in a room filled with the scent of

buttered popcorn and artificial fruit flavor. It’s an unabashedly pleasure-seeking sonic deluge that wears its artifice proudly: every sound polished, mixed and filtered until it gleams, the brightest and most stimulating version of itself.

Digital vocal effects have become mainstays of pop production, but they can only push so far before a star’s voice is no longer recognizable. In “Immaterial,” Sophie shows us what happens when that voice is set free from the body, allowing the top-line melody to plunge with impossible velocity through electronic trills and warps. The vocal line, performed by the Canadian singer Cecile Believe, multiplies and refracts, recombining and bending, passing dizzily through a spectrum of hyperfeminized and hypermasculinized timbres, culminating in a sort of art-pop singularity as Believe yelps: “I can’t be held down/I can’t be held down” in a voice that has become half human and half pure, animated sound. This climax is a palpable reminder that pitch is not just a musical concept but also a word for the dynamic, powerful movement of an aircraft, the sort of motion that stirs elation and turns the body inside out.

In a 2018 interview with Jezebel, Sophie compared pop songs to a roller-coaster ride — similar in duration, and designed to strap the listener in place as they undergo a journey of extreme tension and release. “At theme parks, when you’re a child, you’d have this visceral experience of

being human, and I want music to feel like that,” she said. Beginning in 2013, with the release of noisy, witty, inscrutable singles like “Bipp,” “Elle” and “Lemonade,” which drew inspiration from the sonic properties of materials like metal, latex and soda pop, Sophie made a name for herself by challenging the bounds of listenability and danceability. Collaborations with Charli XCX, Vince Staples and Madonna embedded her in a mainstream that was provocatively enweirdened by her work and by the sonic textures that she introduced into a broader pop vocabulary: the crunchy, feral grind of “Ponyboy,” the shattered dynamics of “Hard” and the deceptive softness of “It’s Okay to Cry.” Sophie made the world of dance music, experimental music and pop more spacious, more accessible to new sounds and new bodies. It’s no coincidence that she was a transgender icon.

After Sophie died, in a fall from a balcony in Athens, Greece, fans mourned the loss of an artist who modeled gender euphoria, someone who seemed to be addressing them from a better, freer future. The last verse of “Immaterial” ends with a vocal line that climbs higher and higher, teetering above the song’s bulk in a pose of triumph:

*I could be anything I want
Anyhow, anywhere, any place, anywhere, any one
Any form, any shape, anyway, anything
Anything I want! ♦*



'HARD LIFE'

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SAULT
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#9

**MUSIC MADE AMID A MOVEMENT.
BY LOVIA GYARKYE**



■ **When I first** heard “Hard Life,” by the British collective SAULT, I immediately texted it to my friends. “I don’t know if you’ve heard about this group,” I would start the messages, “but I’m really vibing to this song.” Then, I would paste a Spotify link and hit send. I used “vibing,” a vague term, to distance myself from how vulnerable the song made me feel. Truthfully, I listened to “Hard Life” on repeat for weeks, mouthing the lyrics I’d picked up and reveling in its gospel-inspired sound. I grew up in a churchgoing family, and now that I no longer attended service, spiritually inflected music felt like the closest I would get to being saved. I wanted my friends, most of whom were Black women, to feel the hope I felt while listening and perhaps experience their own spiritual moment, too.

“Hard Life” hinges on salvation — of the mind, of the body and of a movement. It acknowledges the pain of the centuries-long struggle for Black liberation and promises deliverance. With the Black Lives Matter movement having brought

about a redoubled commitment to Black self-determination and healing, the song feels like a hymn for this moment.

SAULT has managed to keep most details about itself hidden, beyond the identities of a few key collaborators, including the singer-songwriter Michael Kiwanuka, the producer Inflo and the vocalist Cleo Sol. It has released albums with little to no fanfare: two of them, simply titled “5” and “7,” in 2019, and then two more, “Untitled (Black Is)” and “Untitled (Rise),” last year. The music prances through decades and genres, reinforcing links among the past, the present and perhaps the future of Black life: ’60s jazz, ’70s funk, slick ’80s R&B, trippy ’90s neo-soul. Combine that range with the directness of SAULT’s lyrics, and you get music that embodies a kaleidoscopic vision of what it means to be Black, appreciating that we do not all live, act or feel or love in the same way.

“Hard Life,” from “Untitled (Black Is),” opens with a stiff, craggy drumbeat. When the main

vocalist enters, it’s to catalog a series of tensions, with the lyric “It’s a hard life” as her repeated lamentation — but also to evoke a hopeful future. “It’s a hard life, fighting to be seen,” she croons, and yet, “be on your way, things are gonna change.” This candor echoes protest music of the civil rights era; by the time she declares “I ain’t gonna wait no more/Gonna start a war,” there’s a hint of Nina Simone, whose 1964 song “Mississippi Goddam” expressed a similar exhaustion with reform and appetite for revolution.

Yet “Hard Life” doesn’t linger on weariness. Toward the end, a bit of spoken word comes in. “Every day feels like a battle/Battle of the self, battle of the mind,” a voice says. “Just try to be kind to yourself.” What does kindness to yourself look like? How is it practiced? The chorus offers the beginning of an answer: “Everything is gonna be all right, because God is, God is on your side.” I hear it as a gentle reminder that the survival of the movement depends on *some* kind of faith. ♦

'RIVER DREAMS'

BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND
BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND
BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND
BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND
BEVERLY GLENN-COPELAND

'LIFE IS ABOUT WONDERFUL THINGS
AND VERY DIFFICULT THINGS.'
INTERVIEW BY JEREMY GORDON



#10

#10

■ **Beverly Glenn-Copeland** is a 77-year-old New Age musician who found his first widespread audience in 2015, when his 1986 album “Keyboard Fantasies” was rediscovered by the Japanese record collector Ryota Masuko and subsequently reissued. The soothing, spiritual undercurrent of his compositions offers a particular respite from contemporary reality; it has a way of sounding above it all, even as Glenn-Copeland remains immensely grounded and present in real life. We spoke about how Covid-19 affected his career, and about a new song, “River Dreams,” from his career-retrospective “Transmissions” compilation.

Your career has a long timeline: You were making music in the '70s and '80s, but it didn't find a fandom until recently. And then just as you were ready to embark on your first tour, we were pitched into lockdown. Last year, I was

supposed to do a tour of Australia, then Britain and probably Ireland and Europe. That just went *poof*. Covid knocked my wife and me flat, in terms of being homeless and having to move three times in the space of six months. But at the same time, it offered us gifts. Our daughter decided to make a GoFundMe, and that was incredibly successful. It's one thing to believe in the kindness of people; it's another thing to see it in mass energy happening in front of your eyes. So much money came in that we were able to buy a house for cash.

The amount of time that I could go out and about, as a person who is now 77, is very limited. It's difficult to travel and be on the road at any age, but especially at my age, most of which has to do with the physical reality that your body starts breaking down. I have a trick knee — I have to travel with crutches. When I

do a concert online, the lighting isn't as spectacular, but it's more intimate, because I'm able to get up on my audience and talk to them in a way that I cannot when I'm onstage. The stage has wonderful characteristics, but in truth I prefer the intimacy of that connection. For a lot of musicians, they jump around onstage, there's a lot of large motion happening — but if you're a more intimate kind of performer, then that's very difficult to translate.

You've spoken about the “Universal Broadcasting System,” your belief that art is transmitted to us by the universe. Is that how “River Dreams” came to you? I was noodling around the piano one day, and all of a sudden, I realized it wasn't noodling. There was something going on beyond anything I ever thought about. Out through my hands and out of my mouth came something, and that was it. I hit my iPad, and literally, in one recording, that was “River Dreams.” That was a trance — literally, a transmission. I really appreciate that there were no words attached to it. You can relate to it without having to know a language.

What were you feeling as you made it? Mostly it's awe, because I know I couldn't have sat down and thought that out. I studied music, yes, yes, and I did the things that you need to do in order to develop your craft, but the best way I can put it is like this: Most of my dearest friends are visual artists, and they all say the same thing. “I'm getting on the canvas, and all of a sudden, there's a hand that's molding whatever it is, and when I'm finished, I stand back and go, ‘Oh, that was sent through.’”

You've talked about the challenges of being Black in a white world, transgender in a heteronormative culture, an artist in a business world. I think one reason your music and career have resonated with a young audience is the resilience it suggests. Life is about wonderful things and very difficult things. I just accepted that that was an aspect of the difficulties that I was going to be experiencing — that I had all kinds of other wonderful things in my life.

We have infinite compassion within each of us. It's just — How do we tap it? How do we tap into our infinite wisdom, our infinite courage? I'm having to figure out how to be wiser, and more compassionate, and more courageous. If I can share that and share my process of how I am doing that, and many other people can share their processes, *we* can be wiser, more courageous, more compassionate.

I never have a plan for what I'm going to do. I sit at the piano, and I see what comes out, you know? But I noted that this is a little bit of a pause for me, and I'm curious to find out what will evolve in the pause. What directions will I be sent in, by whatever? ♦

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Photo illustration by Celina Pereira

Source photos: Alex Sturrock; Getty Images

STREET MUSIC

First came the Italians singing from their balconies. Soon, cities everywhere heard music leaking into new places.

By Jazmine Hughes

By the beginning of lockdown in Dormont, Pa., Amy Kline had already watched the viral videos of Italians isolated in their homes, singing on their balconies to pass the time. Inspired, she posted a meme about it in a local Facebook group: “Messaging all my neighbors on Nextdoor, telling them they all better [expletive] have every single god damned line from Les Miz memorized for when we do the singing out our windows together thing.” It started getting some traction, so she wrote, “If 100 people like this by tomorrow morning, I’m in.” And then, overnight, she — and at least 99 of her neighbors — were.

Some days later, after a 30-person Zoom rehearsal, the Dormont “CoronaChoir” sang “Do You Hear the People Sing?” a protest anthem from “Les Misérables,” in front of their homes. Kline estimates that 700 neighbors participated. On

some blocks, at least one person represented each household; on others, families joined in via Zoom, half a second off from the rest of the group. A few singers wore French revolutionary costumes; the mayor waved his own enormous flag. “It turned out so perfectly — people felt connected to each other,” Kline said. “I knew this sort of thing was happening in other parts of the world, but it still felt really special.”

Those first few weeks of shelter-in-place were especially bewildering and lonesome, our fingers and shoulders itching to make contact with another patch of skin, our brains struggling to find anything to discuss beyond Netflix. Neighborhood singing was a balm — connection without the pressure of having to make conversation.

Music, blessedly, morphed to fit the pandemic with relative ease, be it professional musicians sitting around on Instagram Live playing their hits, like on the webcast Verzuz, or gig musicians streaming tiny concerts, trying to expand their fan base. For some, web shows were a financial lifeline: Even if they brought in only a fraction of what artists would be making from in-person gigs, they were better than nothing.

When shelter-in-place orders began in New Orleans, Sam Williams, a bandleader and horn player, figured that he and his band

would hold off playing for two weeks, and then the world would return to normal. But as the lockdown stretched on, Williams, who goes by Big Sam, told his bandmates they had to do *something*, even just prop up a phone to live-stream sets from his driveway. If they were lucky, maybe they could get some tips.

Williams is the sole provider for his family; as the pandemic continued, his bank account dwindled. Music had been his career for 25 years. So he kept playing, and sometimes after his shows, viewers would contribute to his Venmo account, or his neighbors would come by with tips or even a dish of food. How else was he supposed to survive an edict that banned horn players from performing indoors?

He and the band did shows every Sunday: first church music, then funk. They didn’t face the street when they performed and never told their online audience exactly where they were — Williams, worried about social distancing, was reluctant to draw a crowd — but that didn’t keep neighbors from creeping out of their front yards and onto the sidewalk to watch. People would drive to Williams’s block and listen from their parked cars; delivery workers might take a quick break to enjoy a song or two. “It helps the whole neighborhood to feel some type of normalcy

when they can have live music,” he said. Indoor entertainment is limited in New Orleans, but Williams is still singing, trying to give something to his people in the hope that they can give back to him.

Jennifer Parnall, a Canadian transplant locked down in Spain, also wanted to give back: One day last March, she plugged her keyboard into an amp and played “All You Need Is Love.” Soon her neighbors started requesting songs, shouting them from their windows or scrawling them on a chalkboard and hanging it where she could see. Armed with only a guitar and a keyboard, Parnall tried her best at the Cranberries and Radiohead. In all, Parnall played four songs a day for 100 days.

For the very last song of her very last show, she ran up to her roof with her guitar and performed “Dreams,” by Fleetwood Mac; passers-by and neighbors joined for the chorus, their voices undoing all those months of silence. Not even the GoPro she brought with her could fully capture the exuberance of that moment: Parnall saw one woman across the way, who had been pregnant for months, watching the concert while cradling her newborn baby. It felt like magic, creating something so beautiful for her community in a time of such isolation.

In Brooklyn, a year later, I watched everyone’s videos: Kline and her neighbors in Dormont, recorded by a local videographer. Williams in New Orleans, doing the two-step in his driveway. Parnall in Barcelona, playing to the building facing her own; in one video, she began a song, only to be interrupted by a blaring car horn.

The pandemic changed our relationship to noise: With people stuck inside, the atmospheric sounds of the world — car alarms, barking dogs, ambulance sirens — felt amplified. The human sounds, though, lessened. Even the online concerts were sort of eerie without applause. Parnall waited until the car horn stopped, then began her song again. When she finished, more noise trickled in from the outside: clapping and whooping. People had been there, listening. Somehow, it was the best part. ♦



**'BABY
GROOT'
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**A AND D OMI
J. D. BECK
A AND D OMI**

'BABY





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SO INCREDIBLY YOUNG,
AND SO ABSURDLY
VIRTUOSIC, THAT IT
FEELS AS IF THEY MUST
BE KIDDING YOU.

BY RYAN BRADLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JOHN EDMONDS

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■ A small stage. Blue spotlights. A duo step out, keyboards and drums. They are billed as jazz musicians. They look astonishingly young. What they are wearing is ridiculous, like puffy ski suits from the 1980s: jumpsuit emojis come to life, the kind of fashion that seems pulled from the internet's id. (The outfits were given to them by a mentor, the rapper, singer and producer Anderson .Paak.) Just before they settle in — he's on drums, she's on keyboards — she hits a button that unleashes that air-horn sound effect: *be-be-be-brahhhhh*. The crowd chuckles. Then, her blond hair catching the light and turning an electric purple, she speaks, in a thick French accent: "Thank you for coming to the Billie Eilish cover band." More chuckles. "That's Justin Bieber. I'm Christina Aguilera. And the first song we're going to cover, she wrote when she was kind of like, minus two months before Jesus Christ? And it's called 'Giant Steps.'"

"Sick," the drummer says. He taps his sticks against the high-hat, a sprinter shaking it out before crouching down to wait for the sound of the starter pistol. In the video of this show, shot at a Los Angeles venue in January 2020, you can barely see his face — it's covered by a mop of child-in-a-Dutch-master's-painting hair — but the keyboard player gives him the sort of smile you throw at a friend across the room at a party, a private-joke smile. Then they launch into John Coltrane's "Giant Steps."

To understand what happens next, you must appreciate that "Giant Steps" isn't merely Coltrane's masterpiece; it's among the more difficult jazz standards to perform. The song is a whirling dervish: 26 chord changes in 16 rapid-fire bars, a steady spiral of major-third modulations that

can make even the most adept players scramble. The great pianist Tommy Flanagan takes his solo haltingly on the original recording, racing to keep pace, the music careering out ahead of him. "Giant Steps" has been played countless times by countless people, but no version I'd ever encountered came close to the breakneck virtuosity and thrill of that original.

Then I watched this duo do "Giant Steps" — not Bieber and Aguilera, but the drummer J.D. Beck (16 at the time) and the keyboard player DOMi (19) — and I thought, in this exact order: Oh. Oh, my. Wow. What? WHAT? After a few minutes I started emitting short, snorting laughs. Not because the music was funny, but because you have got to be kidding me: Who *were* these kids?

Over the past year or two, as posts of their shows and rehearsals came online, a lot of people have had similar reactions to DOMi and J.D. Beck. Clips of them in sponsored sessions — for, say, the keyboard maker Nord or the cymbal maker Zildjian — are followed by reaction videos from older musicians who cannot believe their eyes or ears. There's a whole subsection of YouTube videos just trying to unpack Beck's drumming. Last summer, when the Roots assembled a virtual concert, Beck and DOMi made a video appearance, and several of the comments beneath had to do with their otherworldliness: The ongoing joke is that these two might be aliens, crash-landed on Earth to teach a new form of music. (That, or robots.) Before it emerged that the rapper MF Doom had died, the duo posted a video that bounced through selections from "Madvillainy," his beloved 2004 album with Madlib — once again taking what had been revolutionary and pulling it still further.

Then there was the time last November when they performed for the virtual Adult Swim Festival alongside the bassist Thundercat, playing his song "Them Changes" with the pop star Ariana Grande on guest vocals. For a few minutes, near the end, the song devolved into a series of increasingly spicy jazz riffs, leaving Grande bobbing gamely along. It was a weird moment, but somehow it didn't feel like a stretch for these two to be sharing the stage with a gigantic pop star. Their music, freakishly complex and virtuosic as it may be, is not a "difficult" listen. It's sparkly, relentlessly melodic, infused with familiar reference points from funk, neo-soul, the left-field hip-hop of J. Dilla and Madlib, the electronic breaks of Aphex Twin and the loading-screen jingles of Nintendo — like playing Mario Kart while your roommate chops up Pharoah Sanders samples on his laptop. It's just that Beck and DOMi are, at their core, jazz musicians; the thrill is hearing them improvise, listening in on the meeting of two extraordinary musical minds.

During another sponsored session, for Nord, the duo again played "Giant Steps" (only now they titled it, hilariously and disrespectfully, "Giant Nuts"). Midway through, as DOMi is working through an idea, she declares, "I hate this," and the two shift gears, briefly locking eyes as they blast through the remainder of the song. Playing it to that crowd in Los Angeles, she offers a pretty table-setting line before moving her left hand to a second keyboard to play the bass part — all while her right hand covers both the chord changes and Coltrane's lead sax flourishes. Beck joins on his small drum kit, ludicrously fast and tight. The rhythm of "Giant Steps" is usually swung, but with Beck it feels nearly electronic; the hyper-speed clatter of his playing can sound like the chopped-up beats of drum and bass, sounds that once felt reserved for computers. At first, he leaves open space to showcase DOMi's genius. Then she begins vamping, turning things over for him to unleash a series of fills that seem to break apart the space-time continuum.

I've studied the video from the Los Angeles show, frame by frame, many times, trying to figure out what is even happening with their hands. It all seems vaguely impossible. Beck is slouched, barely moving his wrists, creating an entire soundscape from flurries of drum strikes; DOMi sits straight-backed, each hand working through more overlapping ideas than you'd think one person could have brain space, let alone fingers, to execute. When they finish, the crowd erupts, and DOMi puts her phone up to the mic to amplify a series of fart noises — an introduction to the next song, which is called "Bathroom," because, Beck explains, that's where they wrote it.

At moments, coming from players this virtuosic, all of it can feel like a wry put-on — the fart sounds, the song titles, the way they pick up and toss off ideas, genres, time signatures, memes. Maybe this is exactly the type of music we should

**SOMEHOW IT DIDN'T
FEEL LIKE A STRETCH
FOR THESE TWO TO
SHARE THE STAGE WITH
A GIGANTIC POP STAR.**

**SOMEHOW IT DIDN'T
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SHARE THE STAGE**

have expected from a generation that has grown up with not only the entire history of recorded music fully available to them — on demand, since sentience — but everything around the music, too: how to play it, why it works, what is cliché and what is fresh. Their music is both radically sophisticated and full of jokes, a combination of qualities you find in both the 20th century’s jazz greats and the 21st century’s extremely online teenagers. Just after “Bathroom,” they make an absolutely searing, hip-hop-inflected bop out of the theme song from “The Flintstones,” a standard in its day and now constantly covered by YouTube musicians. Why? Why not.

DOMi is Domitille Degalle, who studied at the National Superior Conservatory of Music and Dance in Paris and the Berklee College of Music in Boston. She met Beck in 2018, when each was invited to play at NAMM, the National Association of Music Merchants’ trade show, by a mutual friend: the drummer Robert Searight, who goes by Sput, of the jazz-and-funk collective Snarky Puppy. Beck had been a drum prodigy since age 8 and gigging since 10, mostly around his home in Dallas — with Erykah Badu’s band, with the bassist MonoNeon and eventually with the experimental soul artist Jon Bap.

Apparently, the equipment in the booth where Beck and DOMi first played together was not great. “Everyone sounded bad,” is how DOMi remembers it. “It was so bad. But funny.” Still, they went out to a jam session that night and played together again. DOMi had never heard a drummer quite like Beck before — one “where you know it’s J.D. when he plays,” she has said. “He’s going to change your whole thing when he plays.” When he mentioned that he would be performing at Erykah Badu’s birthday party, “I was like: ‘You know what? I don’t have class. I’m going to come.’” She flew to Dallas for a weekend, joining on keys at the end of the show. When her flight home was canceled, she stayed for another week, playing music with Beck virtually nonstop.

It wasn’t long after they paired up that they began posting bits of their jam sessions online, causing certain nerd-heavy corners of the music internet to go completely bananas. They caught the attention of Skrillex and will.i.am, who joined the line of established musicians who suddenly badly wanted to work with them. They started performing with Thundercat and became friends with Anderson .Paak, who is producing their debut album.

That album has been anticipated for nearly as long as DOMi and Beck have been playing together. Over a year ago, DOMi told an interviewer that it was nearly complete, that half was instrumental and half featured “some artists that we really love,” that it would be all originals plus one cover. The interviewer, from WBGO’s “The Checkout: Live at Berklee,” replied that “it’s going



to be nothing like what we’re used to seeing,” which is correct: The duo’s output up to this point has been video of them performing live, an electricity that might be difficult to capture on record.

In the same interview, Beck said that their approach to music was, simply, “Let’s play everything imaginable and try to do something weird.” Within their mini set for that Roots show was an original called “Baby Groot” that serves as a perfect distillation of that impulse. It’s an unbelievably tight, fast groove that keeps pulsing in different directions: mellowing then brightening,

turning gentle then nasty. It shouldn’t cohere, but it does, and it genuinely sounds like nothing that has come before it.

They finished out their Los Angeles set, the one they began with “Giant Steps,” with a version of “Baby Groot” that lasted just over a minute, a brilliant kicker tossed off at the end, the cherry on top. An answer to Coltrane, only named after the tiny anthropomorphic tree-man from “Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.” When the song was over, they stood, DOMi said thanks, Beck threw a thumbs up and with that they left the stage. ♦

DO THE CANADIAN RAPPER'S
MELODRAMAS STILL MATTER?
BY ISMAIL MUHAMMAD



■ It's hard to pinpoint exactly when Drake stopped feeling like a vital artist, but it's easy to say which song crystallized his sagging influence: "Toosie Slide," the lead single off his 2020 mixtape, "Dark Lane Demo Tapes." The song was tailored to absorb an emerging pop-cultural phenomenon — in this case, the TikTok dance challenge. It's a maneuver Drake spent a decade perfecting: He is a master at co-opting trends.

But "Toosie Slide," with its overly literal chorus — instructions for how to do the song's inert dance ("It go right foot up, left foot slide/Left foot up, right foot slide") — fell flat. Released just as we were resigning ourselves to the pandemic, it was accompanied by a video that featured a masked Drake wandering his richly appointed but mostly empty Toronto mansion, occasionally demonstrating the dance for his audience. Even for a rapper who built his career on claustrophobic melancholy, it felt too insular. Built atop tinny drums and a serpentine synth line that sounds more appropriate for a funeral dirge than a dance track, the song finds Drake dully rap-talking about his usual concerns: snakelike enemies, lovers who've fallen

by the wayside, his inability to trust anyone but his closest friends.

Drake's strength has always been his versatility, a stylistic playfulness that could accommodate dancehall, Afropop, Houston trap and New Orleans bounce. Then there were his endlessly quotable lyrics, which spawned memes that he would then reabsorb into his music and performances. The effect was a sense of invincibility: In 2015, the rapper Meek Mill outed Drake for using a ghostwriter, and in 2018, Pusha T revealed that Drake fathered a secret son. In both instances, Drake survived scandal and remained the surest thing in rap music.

Yet the most crucial element of Drake's endurance as a pop-cultural figure has been the way he insinuated himself into the emotional life of millennials like me. One night, when the cheesy 2013 single "Hold On, We're Going Home" came on during a party I threw, all the dancers in my kitchen audibly sighed as if their most private desires had been sated. Drake reflected back to my generation the scattershot and confused nature of our romantic pursuits in the era of dating apps and social media, when we were all suddenly on camera, the subjects of our own

reality shows. Is there a musical artist who has more accurately conveyed the distorted sense of emotional investment we can have in a text exchange, or the satisfaction in knowing that an ex is checking our Instagram stories?

Drake narrated the emotional tenor of life in my 20s, but I am in my 30s now, and it feels harder to ignore the rapper's faults — especially when those faults begin to extend to questionable interactions with adolescent actresses or a social media presence that seems more appropriate to those actresses (what is it with the constant duck lips?). In this context, "Toosie Slide" is the sound of Drake in emotional and artistic stasis, rapping about the same immature romantic conflicts he was rapping about in 2010.

I broke up with my partner a week before California issued stay-at-home orders. I felt embittered, betrayed and upset at myself for making a necessary decision at the worst possible time. As in years past, I wanted to turn to Drake, to let him narrate my melancholy back to me. "Toosie Slide," though, was a song for children. It revealed an artist who had not matured along with me, who could no longer evoke emotional specificity. I mourned for that too. ♦

'A SECOND GO AT BEING A TEENAGER'

Jason Mantzoukas on a year of solitary listening. Interview by Jeremy D. Larson

Behind the wide-eyed, high-decibel comedy of Jason Mantzoukas, there is a consummate, almost archetypal music geek. Before his roles on shows like “The League,” “The Good Place” and “Big Mouth,” Mantzoukas spent years playing drums, collecting hundreds of records and researching transcendental religious music in North Africa and the Middle East. His love of music is effusive and encyclopedic, and during the anxious, idling days of the pandemic, he found it suddenly reignited. But the kinds of music he was drawn to had shifted entirely.

Was there a moment last year when you realized your listening habits were changing? When my normal life exists, it's busy and chaotic. I listen to a lot of music that is slower, melancholy — stuff that juxtaposes against the larger chaos of my life. When life became incredibly simple, that music became too overwhelmingly sad for me to listen to. I can't listen to Joni Mitchell right now. Even like an album that I loved, Phoebe Bridgers's record — still so sad. So I slowly started realizing that I was choosing to listen to soul, funk and R.&B., because it just didn't trigger those emotions. It allowed me to keep my head above water.

Everything was so scary and stressful in March, in April and May, and I'm a very anxious person by nature. I've been in complete solo isolation for nearly a year now; I've not touched another person in a year. So my music tastes changed simply because I didn't want to completely fall apart. I listened to a lot of Meters. I listened to a lot of the Numero Group's “Eccentric Soul” compilations. My No. 1 song I listened to the most — hold on, I made a playlist for this call. It's

the Del-Reys' “Don't You Know.” It's such a beautifully simple song.

I was obsessed with a lot of music that I literally have no reference for. I feel like I'm having another adolescence — being stuck in my room, just listening to music and watching movies. It's like a second go at being a teenager, when the only way to access stuff was to try to find new music. Which is why I think I'm drawn to all these reissue labels, all these labels that are finding stuff that I just have not known about: Numero Group or Tompkins Square or Mississippi Records or Awesome Tapes From Africa.

I know that you studied transcendental music. Was that something you came back to this year? Huge. I feel like holy music has been reintroduced into my life. I've gone back to Moroccan *Gnawa* music. Also a lot of great spiritual jazz stuff — the Alice Coltrane record from a couple of years ago. Did you watch “Ragas Live,” by any chance? You can sign up and watch the whole thing: 24 hours of uninterrupted, absolutely incredible music performances. They had Zakir Hussain, Terry Riley, all these names. They're all playing from home, so they're like, “Here's Terry Riley from Japan!” They went to Venezuela and played this band I've never heard of, fronted by this woman named Betsayda Machado. Do you know who this is? I'm going

to send you a song. The visual of them out in this beautiful, idyllic, lush green setting, with the river behind them and people going by and boats, and they're singing and playing this — I was, like, mouth agape. I stood up, I got so excited.

One of the true surprises of the year was that I listened to a lot of music that made me want to dance around. The Machado song makes me move. All I do is sit and read, sit and type, sit and watch — I don't need music that just pushes me further into the chair. There's something about forcing myself to expend energy, even if it's just out on my porch for 10 minutes. There's something about that release. That is such a part of my normal life, either through performing or being with friends.

Or even just getting the experience of two people in a room, being like, “Here, listen to this.” I could literally do this for the next three hours!

I would love for you to send me your playlist. The playlist is five hours long. I was like: You know what? I'm just going to dump a bunch of songs in there, because I could talk about any of them as part of this year. And then suddenly, it's five hours.

The flip side of all this dance-music stuff is that I also spent a tremendous amount of the year deep-diving into ambient and New Age music. This artist who goes by

Green-House. And then there was also the Hiroshi Yoshimura reissue of the album “Green.” That Mary Lattimore record “Silver Ladders” — just very calming, a record that really helped me not to spiral out. Beverly Glenn-Copeland. In years past, I would lean more toward harder, experimental ambient stuff — Fennesz, Tim Hecker.

I'm constantly searching for and trying to find ways to discover new music. One thing that has been hardest for me, in the last 10 years, is that so many of those avenues have been closed, because a lot of them were physical. For me, a lot of discovering music came from being able to walk into Other Music in New York. Amoeba Records in Los Angeles. Aquarius Records, out of San Francisco — they would put out a comprehensive list of new releases, with big, chunky write-ups.

One thing I've spent the last year doing — and again, I'm 48 years old — is trying to understand Bandcamp and use it as a portal to discover stuff. Digging deep and unearthing stuff that was like: “I don't know what this is. But because I've been listening to this other thing, now that weird label has shown me this thing.” Now I'm listening to this Brazilian artist who I've never heard of who's blowing my mind. ♦

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JOHN EDMONDS

'VIRILE'





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BY LIZZY GOODMAN

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'VIRILE'

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■ **Last October,** the singer and songwriter Moses Sumney opened up Instagram and posted side-by-side photos of himself, shirtless. One showed a typical good-looking young guy in his underwear. The other displayed the glistening, supercut physique of a professional athlete or superhero. “How it started (2018) vs. how it’s going,” read the text in the caption, above a great number of enthusiastic and sometimes prurient comments. It was an unusually casual post for an artist whose presentation is usually careful and curated, full of expertly art-directed dispatches from another reality. It also felt sweetly conventional: “Very ’90s talk show,” he later told me, laughing at the before-and-after setup.

If there is one thing Sumney is known for, aside from his Prince-like falsetto and his polymathic musical acuity, it’s his *rejection* of that sort of thing — all the conventions that usually surround gender and racial and sexual identity. He studied poetry at the University of California, Los Angeles, and dresses like Dennis Rodman. He has kept himself busy during quarantine recording meditation music for the Calm app and photographing models — of assorted colors, genders and body types — lying in repose in fields wearing high-end bondage gear. “Virile,” the first single off his 2020 album, “græ,” is a lavishly acidic takedown of “the patriarchs” and their need, as Sumney sings, “to stake dominion over all.” He does not normally seem like the type to show off his pec gains on Instagram. And yet: “I wanted to explore masculinity in a really physical sense and make myself a scapegoat for it,” he says, describing a year spent studiously transforming his body into that of an Adonis for the song’s video. “I wanted to turn myself into a piece of meat.”

Like a lot of things with Sumney, this project was partly a cerebral exercise, a way to ask big questions. Can there be a positive version of masculinity? A nontoxic version? “What is the version that is mine?” he asked me, sighing. “What’s the version that can feel positive and generative and *good*?” He growled theatrically, then laughed. “I wanted that, and I want that still.”

Since Sumney self-released his first EP in 2014, he has seemed like an avatar of everything the culturally sensitive modern musician should be. He can sound like anyone — Aretha Franklin, Can, Kate Bush — and has described his music as “an amalgamation of soul, jazz, folk and experimental indie rock.” By 2017, when he released his debut album and moved from Los Angeles into the mountains outside Asheville, N.C., Sumney had even started to feel shackled by his own Next Big Thing status, exhausted by what he saw as a music world that was “trying to either imprint an identity on me or get me to claim one in order to sell me.” He’d shown that he could do just about anything, but what part of “anything” really belonged to him?

It was alone in the mountains, in a place where he knew no one and no one knew him, that Sumney discovered he didn’t need to close his

‘I WANTED TO
TURN MYSELF
INTO A PIECE
OF MEAT.’

‘I WANTED TO
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OF MEAT.’

eyes and pick an identity out of a hat. He already had one, at least for now: that of a ripped, outré exhibitionist who likes posing naked in mountain waterfalls and making huge, dynamic, aggressively diverse double albums like “græ.”

“As intelligent, sensitive, progressive individuals,” he told me, “we run the risk of getting stuck in the trap of rejecting things just because we’ve learned they’re bad and we’ve been indoctrinated into this heteronormative society” — trying to rid our lives of anything that feels tainted by unequal social structures. But does that mean we can’t enjoy aggressive sounds or luxuriate in looking really good naked? “It’s dishonest to reject pleasure,” Sumney says. “I love rock music! I love grating sounds. I love beautiful sounds. I’m singing all the time, like I’m always doing riffs, always screaming at the top of the range of my lungs when I’m alone in my house. And I’m dancing all the time, and I’m also naked all the time. And it was just like, why can’t I be all of those things in public?”

For most of his life, Sumney felt both invisible and conspicuous — “the worst of both worlds.” Born in San Bernardino and raised by Ghanaian pastor parents, he was the only Black kid in a Christian elementary school; then, in 2001, his family moved back to Accra, which made him the only American kid in an African high school. (“I didn’t have friends,” he says, “but everyone knew who I was.”) By junior year, he was back in the U.S., this time in the bleached-out Inland Empire outpost of Riverside, Calif. Now he was the weirdo African kid — “very nerdy, very skinny” — a grade ahead of his age group and completely out of touch with the last six years of American culture. “There were so many things,” he says, “that contributed to the loser narrative.”

Sumney’s detachment and sense of placelessness — a theme he returns to again and again in his music — is a fairly literal result of growing up like this, but it’s also something he feels he was born into. Even in his own family, he says,

he was and remains the outsider. Growing up, he felt distant from his parents, and when I ask about his two siblings, he jokingly pretends our connection has dropped before brushing off the question: “We’re cool, though; we’re good.” His parents worked constantly and had very different hopes about their son’s future. “They wanted something more traditional,” he says, “which is a common immigrant story, I think.” A lawyer or a neurosurgeon would have been nice — “like Ben Carson, but 20-years-ago Ben Carson, not this horrifying version. I remember reading his autobiography when I was, like, 12, because it was forced on me.”

There is still a lot that Sumney doesn’t understand about the way he grew up, including why the family moved back to Ghana. He once thought it was because of his older sister. “She was getting involved with gangs and stuff,” he says, “and my parents were like: ‘Oh, yeah, no. We’re not doing this. We’re going back to Africa.’” Now he’s not sure. “What I learned at a much later age is that my parents were illegal immigrants,” he says. “There are a lot of weird family secrets.”

Figuring out which pieces of this story belong to him and which don’t has been the animating force of Sumney’s creative life. He has been feeling his way into himself since the moment he thinks of as his first successful reinvention. In the early 2010s, he moved to Los Angeles, enrolled at U.C.L.A., got a cool haircut, figured out how to dress. He’d been writing songs in his bedroom since he was 10, but songwriting was frowned on at home, so his relationship with music had remained private, a secret he kept with himself. On his own in Los Angeles, with his parents and siblings now back in Ghana, he started letting other people hear him sing. His first gig was at a college coffee house in 2013. Within months, he was being wined and dined by labels.

In a way, everything that has happened since has just been Sumney’s attempt to make sense of that moment, when his private self became public. “People really responding to my voice,

and thinking I could really sing, is not something I thought would ever happen,” he says. “I don’t have any musical training. I’m self-taught. I didn’t learn things formally. I didn’t think I was that talented.” Even two EPs and one critically acclaimed album later, he still felt displaced. “You have to be aware of this prepared version of yourself,” he says of his life in Los Angeles, “this avatar you’ve created, every single day. Even just walking down the street, the avatar has got to be ready.”

So he said goodbye to many longtime friends and moved to Asheville, a place he had always loved but where he knew no one. After being torn between many worlds, the blank slate of the unknown felt, to him, the most like an actual home. It was there, in serene isolation, that Sumney found his “boldness,” he told me. “When I was making the first album, I was really obsessed with minimalism,” he remembers. “The whole idea was: Just because you can doesn’t mean you should. In this second record, I was just like: If you can, then you probably should. I was looking at myself, and I was like, damn, bitch, you can.”

The most impressive thing about “græ” is how cohesive it manages to feel. It is a sprawling, 20-track, 65-minute record of almost arrogantly varied sound: romantic orchestral rapture on “In Bloom,” piano balladry on “Me in 20 Years,” swagger and rage on “Virile,” classic girl-group swoon on “Cut Me,” a cavernous spoken-word setting on “Before You Go,” which features the voice of the actress Michaela Coel. (Also credited on the record: the writer Taiye Selasi, Jill Scott, James Blake, the Esbjörn Svensson jazz trio and the author Michael Chabon, among a vast profusion of others.) “Græ” unfolds languidly, exploring each mood for as long as it feels like keeping you there. It’s also self-consciously smart, both musically and lyrically — often the kiss of death for an art form that needs to live in your gut. And yet, amid all this potentially discordant, thinky maximalism, there’s something steady, warm, confident. Throughout, you’re steeped in the lushness and abundance that Sumney says animates everything he makes.

For almost 10 years now, Sumney has been the only member of his family living in the United States. He didn’t go back to Ghana “because I was so traumatized by it,” he says. But a few years ago, he started visiting and soon began incorporating a sense of the country into his work. He shot all his album art there, and the ethereal, imposing nudes in waterfalls on his Instagram were taken in the mountains outside Accra — which, he notes, look a lot like the mountains where he lives in North Carolina. Making art “was a good reason to go and connect,” he says; he always had work to use as a cover.

At the end of 2020, though, something changed. Maybe it was having been home for most of the year, instead of on the road in support

of “græ.” Maybe it had just been a long winter and he needed some sun. He went to Ghana for more than a month, the longest stretch since he’d lived there, for no reason beyond wanting to. “It was the best time,” he told me. “I got my citizenship. I have a passport for the first time. I have a driver’s license for the first time. And I realized, for the first time, like really, actively — oh, this is a place that I can come to. I know what restaurant I’d go to. I know how to drive around. I have papers.”

When Sumney and I first spoke, via Zoom, we found ourselves in that initial awkward period known to all who’ve spent the year conducting

their business from home — the moment of politely commenting on each other’s camera setups and trying to break the ice. I was stumbling through a question about Asheville, community and what I imagined was his evolving sense of home, and eventually I blurted out an inelegant version of it: “You know, at the end of the day, where do you feel like you’re really from?” It felt like the wrong way to ask. But Sumney raised one eyebrow, then smiled broadly. Here was a topic he’d spent a life digesting. “OK!” he said, grinning and leaning into the camera. “Let’s get *into* it.” ♦



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'OUR JOY (MERCEDES)'



A SONG FOR
THOSE NO
LONGER HERE.
BY ZANDRIA F.
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hip-hop traditions, creolizing across the open-air sonic marketplaces of her more than 20 projects. She has collaborated as a singer and producer with Yasiin Bey (then known as Mos Def), Erykah Badu and Robert Glasper, and is a role model for artists who want to unlock different, explicitly spiritual ways for genres to speak with one another. The multidextrous soul singer Brittany Howard references Muldrow in her song “Georgia,” wishing “Georgia would notice” her musical work.

Muldrow does what Black artists have always done uniquely well — signify upon, revise and refigure a theme, expanding an existing form through a clever new one. Across “Mama, You Can Bet!” Muldrow speaks to ancestry and movement, past and future and the pauses of the present in between — to grieve on “Our Joy (Mercedes),” or to compel herself forward on “This Walk.” A recurrent theme in her music is reconnecting to diasporic Black histories and their promises for freer futures.

For her jazz-focused projects, Muldrow operates as Jyoti, a name meaning “light” and given to her by the spiritual-jazz luminary Alice Coltrane, a dear family friend. As Jyoti, Muldrow straddles a space between divine light and the human condition, her singing otherworldly and tender. When the curtain of “Our Joy (Mercedes)” opens, we find Jyoti weaving her private pain into the soft swing percussion, offering us a piece of her bench on a basement cafe’s stage. The piano’s sure trot is already underway, intent on ferrying us to the end of our grief. Resisting this hurry, Jyoti’s voice drags, slips backward down a chromatic scale, stops, changes keys, rises, turns corners and reconsiders.

Almost by way of apology, she says, partly to us but mostly to Mercedes: “Sometimes I lose touch, get off track, disappear and just think on you; you’re joy, our joy.” The piano clops on, bluesy with a periodic Black church bang so we cannot fall too wistfully into the abyss. “We love us some Mercedes, indeed,” Jyoti declares, stretching “love” to five distinct syllables of lingering, sticky sweetness. This love fortifies us through a series of punctuated ooooooohs and yeahs, defiant, tearful breaths that keep us afloat as we try to return to our surfaces. With Jyoti we fill the basement with Mercedes, calling her name five times in a rising spiral of wind and light. “I love me some Mercedes. I’ll always remember,” we say. And then just like that, we are off the bench and treading water.

To comfort ourselves, we might recall that the line between the living and dead is merely a river. That to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. That the passed-on are not really gone. That one day soon we will join them. We set altars with pictures, sweets and cool water, and we meet them there. We remember that in that room of names, we become a great holy many, and for the length of a good wind, we are together with our bittersweet joy again. ♦

■ I remember gatherings, family reunions, the Imani night of Kwanzaa at the community center, where we called our ancestors’ names, braiding the holy into the secular. A libation was poured; a drum played; something sung. Then we invoked the dead. At first there would be hesitation, each waiting for another to speak, so as not to trample on the offerings. When that reluctance faded, the room would be awash in names, private roars made great public rumbling. Fannie Lou Hamer, Somebody’s Son the third, Somebody’s Grandmother. A room of 30 became a wind-filled 300. Finally, with our guests from the other side of the water present, we would proceed.

I keep this memory of gathering and remembering close lest last year’s Zoom-room homegoings and burials settle in its place and remake my body’s clock and calendar. It will take some time to say the names of those lost to this particular structural violence, with the virus only a secondary

cause of death. I do not think too long about time in this way, because I do not want to drown.

“Our Joy (Mercedes),” from the 2020 album “Mama You Can Bet!” by the singer and producer Georgia Anne Muldrow, contains the magnitude of this year’s grief in water that we, freshly wounded, can tread. Throughout the song’s 1 minute 44 seconds, Muldrow invokes the name Mercedes over and over again — she could be our joy, our mercy or perhaps a woman we knew, who “went on home foreal.” Muldrow invites us to that raw space on the mourning bench: the moment between calling an ancestor’s name and knowing that in doing so, we accept, in some form, the fact of their absence.

Muldrow, daughter of the jazz guitarist Ronald Muldrow and the spiritual singer-songwriter Rickie Byars, describes herself as an “instrument of the ancestors.” In her work as a producer, pianist and composer, she embraces blues, funk, jazz and

Freddie Gibbs began his career in 2004 as a hardened street chronicler unconcerned with morality, sentimentality or mainstream acceptance. The first song of his that I remember loving, “Womb 2 the Tomb,” from his 2009 mixtape “Midwestgangstaboxframecadillacmuzik,” enthalls on account of Gibbs’s gravelly, matter-of-fact rapping; it is the sound of palpable hunger. Gibbs narrated his dedication to making it off the streets with aplomb, and his reputation quickly became one of unflinching authenticity. He assumed the nickname Gangsta Gibbs.

Since then, the 38-year-old Gibbs has reveled in turning that reputation on its head, embracing creative risks that reveal his interest in the surreal and absurd over gangsta rap’s self-seriousness. He collaborated with the iconoclastic experimental producer Madlib on two albums in 2014 and 2019. On the cover of his 2018 album “Freddie,” he struck a pose in homage to the R.&B. legend Teddy Pendergrass, complete with a hot-pink backdrop. The video for his 2019 song “Crime Pays” finds him at a remote mountain estate, caring for pet zebras and fly fishing in an icy river, while the video for his 2021 single “Gang Signs”

portrays him as an adorable animated bunny — albeit one who is toting a gun. This is the core of Gibbs’s ineffable appeal: With each project, he makes audiences reconsider their assumptions of who he is.

“Skinny Suge,” the penultimate track on last year’s “Alfredo,” Gibbs’s taut collaboration with producer the Alchemist, underscores his artistic ethos: It’s a grim story of survival narrated over an instrumental that’s more art-house than gangsta rap. The song takes us back to 2007. When Gibbs’s record label drops him, he returns to his hometown Gary, Ind., and sells drugs to keep his career afloat. The label is calling for its money back, as is Gibbs’s supplier. As he scrambles to teach himself how to cook crack, he learns that the promoters for his upcoming show don’t have any money for him, either. “These losses set me back, man,” he spits. “I’m literally sellin’ dope to rap.”

But as with most of “Alfredo,” the Alchemist’s production on “Skinny Suge” exists in its own universe, coming out of left field to counterbalance Gibbs’s grimy storytelling. Here, the Alchemist conjures a doodling steel-guitar loop

that writhe above a shuffling boom-bap beat. Sometimes it slides into sync with the rapping, but often the two are at odds. Still, Gibbs finds a way to land line after line with the tenacity of a snarling street fighter, though one dressed in silk.

“Alfredo” is Gibbs’s eighth studio album; counting his mixtapes and EPs, it’s around his 20th project over the past 15 years. He has never had a hit nor has he ever fit in with any particular sound or movement. Instead he flits in and out of rap crews, record labels and musical eras. It’s somewhat remarkable, then, that “Alfredo” — a 35-minute exhibition of lyrical flamethrowing that demands a one-gulp listen — is serving as an inflection point for the rapper. The album garnered Gibbs his first Grammy nomination — for Best Rap Album — and reached No. 15 on the Billboard 200 chart, a career best. Maybe it took a year with nothing to do for the rest of the world to register the dynamism of an artist whose every move requires his listener’s full attention. But if Gibbs ever doubted that he would get here, he has never shown it. All he had to do, as he raps on “Skinny Suge,” was “put down the crack, bet on myself.” ♦

‘SKINNY SUGE’

FREDDIE
FREDDIE GIBBS
FREDDIE



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#15
#15
#15

GIBBS WAS ALWAYS WEIRDER
THAN WE THOUGHT.
BY JACKSON HOWARD

'LOCKDOWN'

WHAT'LL WE DO WHEN
SOMETHING CHANGES?
BY LAURA SNAPES



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■ **Last summer**, I discovered a delightful website called Window Swap, created by Sonali Ranjit and Vaishnav Balasubramaniam, a married couple living in Singapore. With real travel a distant prospect, the site showed views from other people's windows, submitted by users around the world. One click let me ignore what was going on around my backyard — horny pigeons jostling on the fence, next door's gnomes — and get lost instead in a view of a marshmallow Hawaiian sky or a sunlit apartment block in Russia or a child bouncing a gigantic ball under stout palms in Colombia.

Window Swap made headlines during the mid-July vacation season, in a year when, for most of us, there was only the fantasy of escape. The same week, the roots-reggae star Koffee released a single that sparkled with the thought of better times ahead. "Where will we go/When di quarantine ting done and everybody touch road?" she sang in Jamaican patois on "Lockdown," whose raucous chorus gave way to cool, spacious verses that showed off her pop instincts and let her lyrics shine.

The video was another window for listeners cooped up indoors: Koffee in a white mesh tank and denim overalls, dancing in the streets of

Jamaica with the guys (including the superstar Popcaan — a casual flex at her growing profile) and breezing up a jewel-bright coastline in a convertible. Her own hopes, though, were more intimate: "I know you're *feeling* me," she sang, with a sly nudge. "You know I'm *feeling* you/So now what we fi do?" For listeners suffering through heightened stress in already-difficult service jobs, or new back pain from working in bad chairs at home, the promise of a fresh, eye-to-eye flirtation served, for the length of a song, as an escape in itself.

The shyly charismatic, 21-year-old Koffee — born Mikayla Simpson, in Spanish Town, Jamaica — made her name on wholesome pleasures. She's a roots revivalist who borrows dancehall's playful rhythms and focuses on positivity: gratitude, a love of language, her wish for a government with its people's best interests at heart. "Life rough sometime," she sang on "Burning," from 2017. "But me know me an me mommy affi si di sunshine." She's the first international female reggae star in some time. The Obamas are fans; Rihanna reportedly tapped her to collaborate on a long-rumored reggae-inspired album. Before the pandemic shut down live performances, she was set to tour with Harry Styles and play at Coachella.

But "Lockdown" isn't the simple flirtation it first appears to be. Go beyond the chorus, and Koffee isn't just fantasizing about where she and a certain someone will go when restrictions lift — she's worrying whether a romance that has flourished undercover, the couple alone in an apartment, will survive exposure to the outside world. Her companion seems evasive, one minute "chatting up di place" about not wanting a relationship, the next preoccupied by marriage (to someone else?). Even though the lovers are just chilling, they know the neighbors are watching them. She suggests places they could go together but is met, the song implies, with stonewalling.

The usually unflustered star tries every possible approach to make her desires heard: politely inquiring about whether her intended's heart has a vacancy; possessively declaring she's going to put their body "on lockdown"; coming right out and expressing her burning impatience. Ultimately, she's reduced to naked desperation: "Me give yuh me heart, beg yuh tek it from me!" It's unlike her. The deceptively lovely song might seem to be about a simple kind of escape, but what Koffee wants most is to free her trapped heart. ♦

'OOPS!' GOES DIGITAL

How a drag-queen duo helped usher queer nightlife online — and rediscover its political roots.

By Sarah Burke

The last time the Brooklyn drag queens West Dakota and Chiquitita performed their weekly show, “Oops!” in person was March 11, 2020. Bars had yet to close, but the duo — beloved for their meme-infused humor and wildly exaggerated lip-syncing to campy deep-cuts — adapted their set to the uncertain moment. Lip-syncing along to “Two Hearts Beat as One,” they spritzed hand sanitizer and ballroom-danced in a “socially distant” embrace — about six inches apart.

Before the pandemic, “Oops!” took place every Wednesday at the Rosemont in Williamsburg, a cozy mainstay for Brooklyn queer folk. The crowd tended to be intimate, familial, made up of those who didn’t have to work the next morning or who needed the ritual enough not to care. It was a “home away from home,” said Chiquitita, who has been a full-time drag performer since dropping out of high school.

Days after that last show, the pair announced a move online. They had to: Along with D.J.s, event producers and even stage designers, they were among a class of informal nightlife workers whose roles and social worlds revolved around the music venues where people gather to dance, drink and find others who affirm them. But those spaces were closing, and rent was still due. West Dakota cobbled together a flier featuring Naomi Campbell in a hazmat suit, protective goggles perched on her nose like designer shades. The new venue would be Instagram Live. Tips, typically tossed onstage, were directed to Venmo.

On the night of March 18, Chiquitita perched her iPad on her

bedroom vanity; West Dakota set up in her living room. Their ensuing duet treated the constraints of Instagram’s interface (two adjacent boxes, one performer in each) as a creative invitation. Coming so close to their cameras that each performer’s face was halved, Chiquitita aligned her dolled-up eyes above West Dakota’s glossed lips to form one Frankensteinian mug belting the baritone operatics of Eduard Khil’s internet-famous “Trololo Song.” The illusion, which the pair rehearsed on incognito accounts, had several iterations. In another, using the help of a roommate, West Dakota appeared to reach into Chiquitita’s apartment to brush her hair, defying their mandated separation. At the end of the evening, the two leaned into the digital border between them and comically kissed each other good night.

As I tuned in from bed that night, the bit, in all its low-tech simplicity, felt like a thrilling escape. It felt hopeful too; proof that, with the necessary resourcefulness, we could still find modes of freedom and togetherness even as the walls closed in around us.

Queer nightlife has always been about conjuring joy and fantasy under any circumstance. That has been no less true during the pandemic. Parties like Papi Juice, which typically takes place in a sweaty Brooklyn concert venue,

instead brought D.J.s into people’s apartments via Zoom; as did Club Quarantine, which promised a queer rave every single night at 9. Livestreamed drag quickly became a new norm: By the end of March, Digital Drag Fest was offering regular shows featuring several alumnae of “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” For all kinds of performers, Instagram Live became a substitute stage — and for their fans, a chance to lose themselves in an audience again. In early May, Verzuz — an Instagram Live musician “battle” that started at the end of March — drew around 700,000 concurrent viewers to a session with Erykah Badu and Jill Scott.

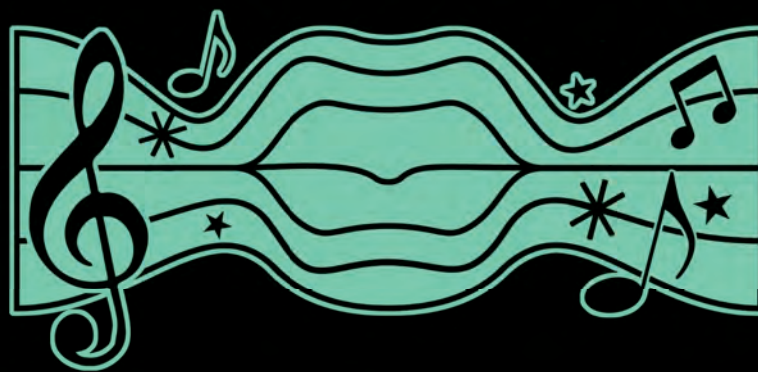
That same ingenuity was soon applied to activism. In late May, as antiracism demonstrations swelled, West Dakota helped bring together a group of local L.G.B.T. producers and activists to organize Brooklyn Liberation, a rally and march drawing awareness to violence against Black trans people. For the June 14 event, organizers repurposed the production skills they would often employ to fill music venues. The artist Mohammed Fayaz, known for party fliers, illustrated the announcement; the local designer Willie Norris provided shirts and iridescent protest signs emblazoned with “BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER”; a network of unemployed audio technicians

set up an outdoor sound system for speeches, which were delivered to a sea of thousands on the steps of the Brooklyn Museum. Despite being billed as a silent march, at least one portable speaker wafted music through the crowd, and voguing broke out in the streets. The day had the euphoria of a reunion.

West Dakota doesn’t consider herself a professional activist. But queer social life itself is a kind of politics; after all, the gay liberation movement was born during a police raid of the Stonewall Inn. “In a way,” she said, “nightlife workers are community organizers. Just the very definition of it: We bring together people, and we create the spaces where people build community.”

She’s not sure if “Oops!” now on hiatus, will return post-pandemic. After confronting her own economic precarity this past year, she’s now occupied with dreaming up possibilities for increased equity in nightlife, like what it would look like to unionize Brooklyn’s drag performers. The vision could offer a lesson to nightlife at large: Instead of merely mourning last year’s many losses, proceeding could mean inventing culture anew.

For West Dakota, that means supporting nightlife’s most vulnerable workers. “I think the biggest thing I’ve learned is how to care,” she said. “How to care for myself, and how to care for other people.” ♦







REBEL

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LIPPA

BY LARRY FITZMAURICE
BY LARRY FITZMAURICE
BY LARRY FITZMAURICE

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PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN EDMONDS

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REBEL

'LEVITATING'
'LEVITATING'
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'LEVITATING'

■ So many striking musical moments from the past months have reminded us that we cannot, at the moment, be together. There was Steve McQueen’s intimate and lovely film “Lovers Rock,” in which you could watch a packed room of West London revelers sway and sing to Janet Kay’s reggae single “Silly Games” — lost in the moment, no social distancing necessary. There was the British singer Jessie Ware’s fourth album, “What’s Your Pleasure?”: It evoked peak-era disco’s mirror-ball largess, all for listeners whose idea of a “night out” had most likely been reduced to an extra trip to the grocery store. Even children’s movies seemed to be rubbing it in. The candy-coated “Trolls World Tour” showed us a pulsing mass of cotton-haired creatures, all under one ridiculous roof, raving to Daft Punk’s eternally joyful “One More Time.” For once, there was a vague sense of disappointment that we were not Trolls, too.

Few human artists stoked this phantom-limb FOMO (how can we fear missing out if there’s nothing to miss out on?) like Dua Lipa. Right around the pandemic’s true kickoff moment in the United States, the British pop star released her second album, “Future Nostalgia,” a polished trip through several eras of dance music: disco’s groovy pulse, new wave’s punchy synths, the brash colors of the 1980s New York club-kid house music that Madonna spent her early years so cannily borrowing from. “Future Nostalgia” offered a soundtrack to precisely the type of wild night that had gone extinct by the time the record actually reached listeners.

Such circumstances would normally dictate that an album simply disappear — which is, in fact, what happened to a surprising number of 2020’s big pop albums. (Taylor Swift, who commanded the masses’ quarantined attention with not one but two surprise releases, was a notable exception.) But Lipa and her party-hardy perspective had remarkable stamina; “Future Nostalgia” owes its success to a seemingly never-ending stretch of incredible singles. The latest and possibly greatest, “Levitating,” features production work by the onetime Madonna collaborator Stuart Price and sounds practically like someone pulling the string on a party popper. Handclaps and stray vocoder lines orbit Lipa’s voice as she urges listeners on, pressing them in the same manner of the fitness instructor she played in one recent video: “Come on/ Dance with me.”

Lipa’s yearlong promo run was a master class in maintaining ubiquity. At press time, there exist *three* versions of “Future Nostalgia” on major streaming services, each one offering another chance to draw listeners back with more material: There was the original, and then there was the now-perfunctory “deluxe” edition afforded to every substantial pop release, and then came “Club Future Nostalgia,” a top-down remix of the entire album fashioned by the famed underground D.J. the Blessed Madonna.

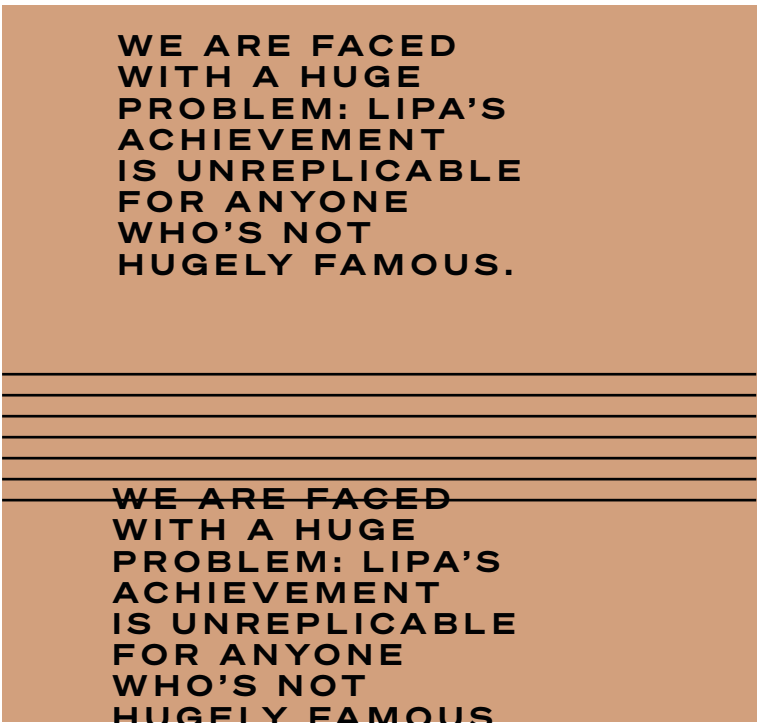
The most stunning bid to stay in the front of your mind, though, was “Studio 2054,” from November — a flashy, over-the-top livestreamed concert, sponsored by American Express and

packed with guests ranging from Miley Cyrus to Bad Bunny to Elton John. It cost more than \$1.5 million to stage and drew a record-breaking five-million-plus paying viewers.

The concert represented not just a monumental feat, pulled off during a deadly pandemic, but also a discomfiting sign of what might lie ahead for the music industry. If livestreaming represents the immediate future of concerts in the continued absence of flesh-and-blood performances, we are faced with a huge problem: Lipa’s achievement is unreplicable for anyone who’s not a hugely famous pop star with considerable cash to burn. Many musicians who embraced livestreaming in 2020 did so in a stripped-down, functionally intimate sense — playing quietly from their own living rooms, or in empty venues, or even in the blocky, digital confines of the video game “Minecraft” — with results that were light years from the feeling of, say, watching them perform in a small, crowded club. But the HD glitz you get from an artist like Lipa might actually be an improvement on your typical view from the cheap seats of an arena. Events like “Studio 2054” should be the exception, but in the increasingly capital-desperate eyes of the music and events industries, they could end up being the rule — leaving artists with smaller platforms and tighter budgets few options when it comes to retaining visibility in a crowded market.

The sleek chassis of “Studio 2054” had a culturally insidious air, too. The event’s name was cribbed from the famously exclusive New York nightlife hub Studio 54, and the illuminated structures strewn about the set weren’t too far off from the décor you would’ve found in a pre-Covid Brooklyn dance spot. In one clever bit of fourth-wall-breaking, Lipa leaned in to the Blessed Madonna, who acted as a mock D.J. for the event, to request one of her own songs — effectively cosplaying as a regular clubgoer trying to hear that one song that will make the night feel complete. Even the backup dancers seemed loved up, opening the show with applause, conjuring a celebratory vibe that participants were expected to share in from miles away, sitting in front of a screen.

This kind of dance music’s origins are in the expression of the oppressed — in the creation of open, inclusive spaces and communities for people who’ve been marginalized by the rigid conformity enforced everywhere else. Clubs often represent something sacred and secret, a place where people can come together in ways that are otherwise unprovided for by society at large. An event like “Studio 2054” — expensive, corporate, impersonal and ultimately bloodless — stands opposite those aims, even as it lovingly pays tribute to the aesthetics that accompany them. If Dua Lipa’s re-creation of club culture represents the single most visible reflection of nightlife in the pandemic era, we have every reason to try to envision a better future. ♦



EMMA RUTH RUNDLE AND THOU
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“The Valley” is the song that closes Rundle’s collaborative album with the doom-metal band Thou, “May Our Chambers Be Full.” It tumbled into the world last October, at a point when so many of us were hitting our second, maybe third pandemic wall, exhausted with the sameness of our lives and the uncertainty waiting beyond. “May Our Chambers Be Full” was, for me, the perfect album to sink into — an album with songs that, at first, offer some beauty to carry you through the darkness, before unraveling into a mess of noise, of enchanting terror. A glimpse of the setting sun before the horrors of night descend.

The second verse of “The Valley” opens with Rundle singing “I want to step into the armor of another, stronger/I want to look once through the eyes of someone good.” In the exhaustion of last fall, when I could feel the creeping breath of winter blowing at the newly barren trees and browning the once-fluorescent leaves, I desired — for a moment — an opportunity to step into the body or mind of someone who appeared more joyful, more mentally and emotionally equipped than I was to deal with what had been and what was coming. My neighbor, who ran every morning, smiling and waving at everyone he passed. The person in the grocery store with headphones, spinning and dancing while picking items from the shelves. I envied the ability to emotionally ascend, even briefly, to a better place than I found myself in.

But as quickly as that assertion arrives in “The Valley,” it vanishes, like walking through a dark forest and running toward what appears to be a sliver of light before arriving and realizing that it is the doorway to another, darker forest. I don’t know if calling this a “trick” does the machinery of the song justice. I like a song that moves, that ends in a different place than it begins. I am especially drawn to that now, in my own era of immobility. In the final three minutes of the song’s nine, there’s a repetitive dirge within the dirge, beginning with the lyrics “You see them?/ All those who have fallen/ Stacked up like stones in a pile” and accumulating in volume, until the words grow more treacherous, and then, in the song’s final two minutes, the hissing growl of Thou’s Bryan Funck joins the fray, he and Rundle not wrestling for each word but unifying to illuminate the severity of the lines.

It bears mentioning that this song is the last song on an album that is already immersive and wonderfully visceral and that by the time it ends you might feel trapped in a room you cannot escape — but a familiar one. A room where incapability might have its appeal. Maybe because I am prone to fantasy spirals and emotional wandering, I needed the constant reminders tethering me to the unkindness of the world. Balance, I suppose. I enjoy the consistency of my trappings. A day as dark at its opening as it was at its closing. ♦

■ **Among a great** many other decisions, this was also the year that I decided to get blackout curtains for my bedroom. Near the end of summer, as every day began to feel even more identical, I decided that I was no longer invested in the newness of morning. For a moment, I craved a different illusion. I would wake up without an understanding of time beyond darkness. It felt fitting, comforting, to sink into the endless black for some waking moments before groping around for my phone and squinting at the harsh light informing me that it was either time to get moving or time to fall back asleep if I could. In a cavernous year, I made my place of rest into a cavern.

Some years back, I was summoned to Louisville, Ky., by a friend who told me I had to come down to see Emma Ruth Rundle, a singer who floated seamlessly among genres — folk and

ambient noise and metal. I didn’t mind making the three-hour drive to spend a little bit of time with people in a packed bar — an impulse that feels entirely alien to me now. I recall the way the stillness onstage belied the sound being produced: Rundle and her band, barely moving but rattling the architecture of the room. The lyrics, patiently haunting. Once, I played the Rundle album “Some Heavy Ocean” (2014) for a pal of mine who had never heard her before, and she turned to me halfway through and said, “I like that everything she sings sounds like a warning or a threat.” This is the best way I have to explain Rundle — not necessarily her voice itself, but her delivery of information, the way she sings the words “just another gray landscape to face” in a whisper that increases in both silence and intensity.

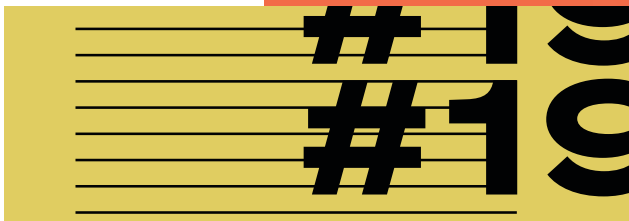
BILL FRISELL
BILL FRISELL
BILL FRISELL

HALF A CENTURY SPENT WITH A GUITAR,
AND WITH THIS SONG. BY JOHN LINGAN

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‘WE SHALL OVERCOME’



■ **For his final** shows before the pandemic, Bill Frisell was touring U.S. jazz clubs with his new quartet, HARMONY: Frisell on electric guitar, along with the great, dramatic singer Petra Haden, Hank Roberts on cello and Luke Bergman on baritone guitar. When I saw them in Baltimore, on the first night of March 2020, they seemed to be in a set-long mind-meld. HARMONY is a quiet group, and though each musician is masterly, their goal is to honor the concept the project is named after. Nothing is high-pitched, no instrument overwhelms the others; they play

to blend. Bergman and Roberts added their own background vocals at times, and Frisell glided around all their melodies with his electric guitar, sometimes doubling Haden’s vocal parts, sometimes building drama on his own. At moments — especially when they played old songs like “Red River Valley” or “Hard Times Come Again No More” — they sounded like a chamber group gathered around a prairie campfire.

Frisell turns 70 this month, and at this point, innovation and exploration are so fundamental to his musical identity that even a small,

unflashy band where everyone sings except him still beams with his sensibility. HARMONY’s self-titled debut album — released in 2019, the guitarist’s first record as a leader for Blue Note in his 40-year career — contained the same genre-indeterminate mix of music that’s typical of Frisell: jazz standards, show tunes, old folk songs and haunting, melodic originals.

In Baltimore, HARMONY closed with a song the group hasn’t recorded but Frisell has played often over the past few years. It’s an uncomplicated tune with a very deep history. Musicologists

have traced its origin to an 18th-century hymn, and a version of it was likely sung by enslaved laborers. It was a union song too, sung by striking workers in the '40s, around the time Pete Seeger first heard it and helped spread it to the folk-festival audiences of the '60s. The civil rights movement, starting with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, adopted it as an unofficial anthem, making it famous enough that President Johnson quoted its title in his 1965 call for the Voting Rights Act. In all of these cases — and also in Tiananmen Square, Soweto and the many other sites of protest where it has been heard — “We Shall Overcome” has been more a statement of collective hope than a call to arms. It is a proclamation of faith.

Frisell told me that, musically speaking, he likes the song because of how deeply he has internalized it. “Like when you’re walking and humming or whistling, almost unconscious that you’re doing it — that’s what you want,” he says. “That’s what ‘We Shall Overcome’ is. It’s *in* us, the melody and the words. When I play it, the song is like a jungle gym you can play around in. The song is there, and you can take off anywhere.”

In Baltimore, Frisell and his bandmates moved through “We Shall Overcome” with joyful purpose, Frisell improvising while all three vocalists joined together. I didn’t know it then, but this would be my last ticketed concert before venues across the country went dark. The last thing I experienced in a full club was Petra Haden raising her hands high and compelling us all — Frisell now included — to sing together for our deliverance.

Had things gone as planned, Frisell’s next move would have been to focus on a new group, this one nominally a jazz trio, with the bassist Thomas Morgan and the drummer Rudy Royston. Things, of course, did not go as planned. Frisell’s datebook was soon filled with canceled gigs. “It’s been kind of traumatic,” he told me via Zoom, though his ever-present smile never quite wavered. But the new trio’s debut album did eventually come out, in August 2020. It closes with its own version of “We Shall Overcome” — this one instrumental, pastoral in its feeling, a soul ballad at the end of a record spent rambling around the outskirts of high-lonesome country and spacious modern jazz.

Royston and Morgan are well established in their own careers, but they’re both younger than Frisell, and each came up in a wide-open jazz world that Frisell helped create. In the early 1980s, Frisell began incorporating digital loops and other effects into his live and recorded playing and wound up crafting an entirely new role for the electric guitar in a jazz setting: creating atmospheres full of sparkling reverb, echoing harmonics, undulating whispers that sneak in from outside the band. As he wove those patches of sound around a trio, with the drummer Paul Motian and the saxophonist Joe Lovano, he brought a new spaciousness and pensiveness to

the instrument, completely resetting its dynamic range. His quietest playing was like a distant radio; his loudest was a heavy-metal scream that could sit neatly beside, for instance, the Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid on a 1985 duet album, “Smash & Scatteration.”

Frisell’s approach to his repertoire was just as innovative. He knew his standards but gained an early reputation for openness to pop music and just about anything else — most famously on his 1992 record “Have a Little Faith,” which features everything from a small-group orchestration of an Aaron Copland ballet score to the same band’s searing instrumental version of Madonna’s “Live to Tell.” There was a similar adventurousness in his originals: Across the '90s, he composed for violin and horns (on “Quartet”), for bluegrass musicians (on “Nashville”), for film scores and for installation soundtracks.

This is Frisell’s great accomplishment: He makes a guitar sound so unique that it can fit with anything. This became fully clear around the turn of this century, when his records skipped from improvised bluegrass to “The Intercontinentals”

— which featured a band of Greek, Malian, American and Brazilian musicians — and then through to “Unspeakable,” a sample-based record made with the producer Hal Willner, a friend since 1980. Willner also introduced Frisell to artists like Lucinda Williams, Elvis Costello and Allen Ginsberg, three of many legends who have invited Frisell into the studio to add his signature to their recordings. Every year of this century, he has appeared on or led a new record, often several records, and yet it would be impossible for even the most obsessive fan to guess what the next one might sound like.

Frisell has largely swapped his old dynamic range for a stylistic one: He doesn’t play as loud these days, but he plays everything, and with everyone. He is on the young side of jazz-elder-statesman status, but in the past four decades, no one else has taken the collaborative, improvisational spirit of that music to so many places.

And now, like so many of us, he’s just at home. “I shouldn’t be complaining,” he told me, from the house in Brooklyn that he shares with his wife. “I’m healthy, I have my guitar. But my whole

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life has been about interacting musically with somebody else.” At one point he held up a stack of notebooks and staff-paper pads: “What am I gonna do with this stuff?” he asked. “Usually I’ll write enough, and I’ll get a group together and make a record. But that’s after like a week or two of writing. Now it’s a year or more of ideas.”

He has played a few outdoor shows in front yards with his longtime collaborators Kenny Wollesen on drums and Tony Scherr on bass. He has played similar gigs with Morgan and Royston. He has performed streamed concerts, including a recent Tyshawn Sorey show, at the Village Vanguard, with Lovano. Frisell has mourned too: Hal Willner died from Covid-19 in April, right after the two were discussing their next collaboration. And he has practiced — as if he were back in high school, he says, working through songs from his favorite records in his bedroom. Often they’re the same ones he practiced in the mid-1960s, from Thelonious Monk to “Stardust.”

But that is the extent of recent musical connection for a guy who describes playing guitar as his preferred method of “speech” — a guy who got a guitar in 1965 and, since joining his first garage band, has rarely gone a day without playing with somebody else.

Frisell says he can’t remember when he first heard “We Shall Overcome,” but it would have been sometime during his school days in Denver. “I grew up in a time with a music program in public schools,” he told me. “I’m in seventh grade, and that song was coming around that time. And my English teacher, Mr. Newcomb, is playing us Bob Dylan records, because he said it was like poetry. This was 1963, ’64. On TV you see ‘Hootenanny’ along with Kennedy’s assassination. January 1964, I saw M.L.K. speak at our

church. A couple weeks before that, ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’ came out. Then a couple weeks after that, the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan. It was in the air.”

The neighborhood he grew up in, he told me, was very “Leave It to Beaver” and overwhelmingly white. It was Denver East High School, and its band threw him together with a wider group of kids, including the future Earth, Wind & Fire members Andrew Woolfolk, Philip Bailey and Larry Dunn. “When Martin Luther King was killed, our high school concert band was performing and the principal came in and told everyone,” Frisell says. “It was horrible. I was in the band room, with Andrew Woolfolk, with my Japanese-American friend whose parents were in the internment camps, and we were comforting each other.” It gave him the sense that music transcended personal differences and that the camaraderie shared by collaborators was a model for other forms of strife. “From that time, I carry with me this idea that the music community is ahead of its time trying to work things out.”

“We Shall Overcome” became a regular part of his repertoire in 2017. It’s not the first time he has gone through a phase of ruminating on a particular tune, working through it in different settings: Surely no one else has recorded so many versions of “Shenandoah,” and he played “A Change Is Gonna Come” a lot during the George W. Bush presidency. But as we moved through the past four years, he was drawn back to “We Shall Overcome,” this tune from his childhood. “I was just trying to make a small hopeful statement,” he says. He didn’t know that by the time his trio released the song on their debut, it would be the summer of the George Floyd protests and John Lewis’s death. They reminded him, he says, that “We Shall Overcome” is “one of those songs

that is always relevant. That song kind of sums it up. Every time I think about giving up, there are these people like John Lewis — we owe it to them to keep going and trying.”

Frisell appeared on at least nine albums in 2020, including his trio’s “Valentine,” records from Elvis Costello and Ron Miles and Laura Veirs, tributes to the music of T. Rex and the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and “Americana,” a collaboration with the Swiss harmonica player Grégoire Maret and the French pianist Romain Collin. “Americana” is the closest to a “typical” Frisell album, meaning it features not just his languid, layered playing but also his heart-tugging sense of emotional drama. The tempos are slow, and the track list includes recognizable pop covers, such as “Wichita Lineman” and Bon Iver’s “Re: Stacks.”

The album is improvisational, but it’s cozier and more melodic than most contemporary jazz. This is another mode that Frisell pioneered. If you watch solemn documentaries about heartland struggles or are familiar with public radio’s interstitial music, you’ve heard his influence. Younger guitarists in the cosmic-country realm, like William Tyler and Steve Gunn, also have a bit of Frisell’s unassuming lope. He’s one of the quietest guitar heroes in the instrument’s history.

His only trick, as he explains it, is “trying to stay connected to this sense of wonder and amazement. That’s where it helps to have other people. Even just one other person. If I play by myself or write a melody, it’s one thing. But if I give it to someone else, they’re going to play it slower, faster, suddenly you’re off into the zone. Being off the edge of what you know, that’s the best place.”

This attitude has earned him a lifetime spent on stages and records with artists that he revered and studied as a boy, jazz players like Ron Carter, Charles Lloyd and Jack DeJohnette. But now that this journey is on pause, for the first time in 55 years, it’s as though Frisell has no choice but to take stock of what he has learned from these artists and his relationship with their legacies. “It’s just overwhelming what we owe to Black people,” he said at one point in our conversation. “Our culture, we would be nothing. *Nothing*. But personally, too.” He recalled, again, his teenage years: “In Denver, I was always welcomed into it. It didn’t matter that I was white. I remember a great tenor player named Ron Washington. He was in a big band where you just read the charts, and I could do that and get through the gig. An agent set up those gigs, and he called me once, and I showed up, but it wasn’t the big band. It was just Ron, a drummer and me. I didn’t know any tunes at all.” He laughed again, then described something reminiscent of the second verse of “We Shall Overcome,” the one about walking hand in hand: “Ron was so cool. He just said, ‘Let’s play a blues.’ Then another. And another. He led me through.” ♦

— LIFE HAS BEEN A
— INTERACTING MU
— WITH SOMEBODY

— ‘I’M HEALTHY, I HAVE MY
— GUITAR. BUT MY WHOLE
— LIFE HAS BEEN ABOUT
— INTERACTING MUSICALLY
— WITH SOMEBODY ELSE.’



UNION SONGS

Zoom wasn't built for playing music — but it's pretty good for organizing.

By Damon Krukowski

When all our calendars went blank last March, I think many musicians dove into Zoom out of pure reflex; it was like looking for a place to hang out after soundcheck. We are used to killing time, and we're accustomed to doing that together.

Zoom turns out to be a lousy place for music, though. Its designers boast that it has the lowest latency — the delay between your actions and when they register for others — in the industry; they aim to keep it below 150 milliseconds. This sounds good until you learn that for music, the maximum workable latency is considered to be about 10 milliseconds, beyond which the cues between musicians break down. (As a drummer, I find even 10 too much.) This isn't just being fussy — try clapping along with your own image on Zoom, and I guarantee you won't even be able to keep time with yourself.

So this year I have been hanging out on Zoom with musicians

and *not* playing music. Instead, we've been doing what Zoom was designed for: conferencing. This is a new activity for most of us. Musicians generally don't have business meetings, at least not with one another. What happens when you put us in a virtual conference room together? The same thing that happens whenever you gather a group of workers: We organize.

The Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (U.M.A.W.) could probably have come about only in a year without touring. Normally, musicians who don't regularly play together cross paths only briefly, when we share a stage or pass through one another's hometowns. We're too itinerant for regular get-togethers; there are roadies who don't even bother having permanent addresses. But with all of us at home, scheduling Zoom meetings proved easy. Musicians contacted other musicians. We talked about the situation we'd found ourselves in and what we might do about it.

At the first meeting, in April, I knew only a few people in the virtual room — mostly the members of the political punk band Downtown Boys. There were others I knew from their music, though we'd never met: Sadie Dupuis from the band Speedy Ortiz; Ryan Mahan from Algiers; Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo, or SAMMUS; Cole Smith from DIIV. Then there were many whose music I would learn about

only as I got to know them. Musicians are fast at forming bonds. I think the intensity of our relationships mirrors the intensity of our work: You get to know someone very well and very quickly in the close confines of a stage or a van.

Soon we were comparing notes on our industry. Ever since streaming took hold a decade ago, the only real income many of us can earn is through performance. When the pandemic shuttered venues, it threw us all out of work. Musicians still made music, of course; many have managed to record and release new material during lockdown. But few have any hope of earning much money from that labor. Streaming now represents some 80 percent of all revenue for recorded music, and it's not a great proposition for artists. Spotify, for instance, doesn't pay on a per-stream basis, but the U.M.A.W. calculated that each stream is worth, on average, about \$0.0038. In order to earn the equivalent of a \$15-per-hour job, you'd need 657,895 streams of your music per month — for each person in your band.

The first band my partner Naomi Yang and I were in, Galaxie 500, sees about three-quarters of a million monthly streams on Spotify, which earns the three members about \$1,000 each. That's for material we own outright. Typically, the money a band brings in will be shared not just with a label, but with producers,

with managers — all the labor it takes to get a recording heard. You might need tens, even hundreds of millions of streams per month to make a living wage, something only the very top of the industry's pyramid can expect.

This state of affairs will be painfully familiar to workers in many industries. Musicians are just the original "gig" workers: Like Uber drivers, we're independent contractors who bear the cost of our own tools, health care and self-employment taxes, while the corporations that control access to our work take in billions in revenue. Spotify saw its stock more than double in value during the pandemic; it is currently capitalized to the tune of \$54 billion.

All year, locked out from touring, we did what workers before us have done. We researched and talked about our industry's structure and made plans — things we would never have been able to do from the back of a van. Our first action was to join many other organizations in successfully lobbying Congress to include gig workers in pandemic unemployment assistance. The second, started in October, is called Justice at Spotify: a set of demands asking the company to include musicians' material interests in its goals and practices.

Working with other musicians to help build the U.M.A.W. has, for me, been an uplifting experience in depressing times. Many of the other members are close to half my age, and I've been continually inspired by their energy, their care for one another, their fury at injustice. Passions sometimes spill over, as they do in bands, but the way these younger musicians model both giving and demanding respect is something I don't remember learning so well anywhere else — definitely not in my era's indie-rock scene, anyway.

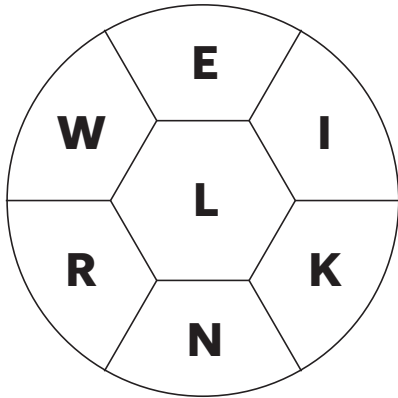
It's been a relief simply to have space for hanging out with other musicians at all — a theme many of our recent meetings have turned to. Musicians are, almost to a one, very social beings. That's why we form bands. We can't play music now in the ways we are used to. But we can, my comrades and I have discovered, still work together. ♦

SPELLING BEE

By Frank Longo

How many common words of 5 or more letters can you spell using the letters in the hive? Every answer must use the center letter at least once. Letters may be reused in a word. At least one word will use all 7 letters. Proper names and hyphenated words are not allowed. Score 1 point for each answer, and 3 points for a word that uses all 7 letters.

Rating: 6 = good; 12 = excellent; 18 = genius



Our list of words, worth 20 points, appears with last week's answers.

WHIRLPOOL

By Patrick Berry

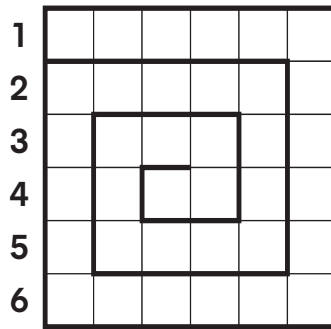
Row answers fill correspondingly numbered Rows. Answers to Whirlpool clues start at the top left corner and spiral inward along the heavily outlined path, one after another.

ROWS

1. "Minute Waltz" composer
2. Despicable pipsqueaks
3. Person you might see a lot of?
4. Queen of Soul's first name
5. Sycophantic guy (hyph.)
6. The "A" of A&M Records

WHIRLPOOL

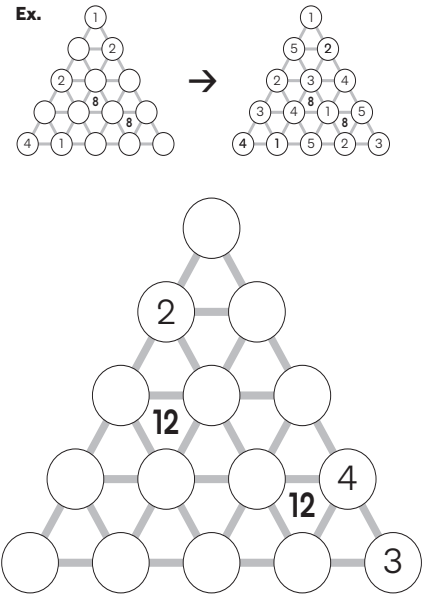
Cut (down), as a tree • Referee's aid on close calls (2 wds.) • Belgian city that's a center of the diamond trade • Pillow covers • Wise and well read



TRIANGULUM

By Wei-Hwa Huang

Enter the digits from 1 to 5 in the circles so that no digit is repeated along any line, and so that the bold numbers inside the grid equal the sum of the digits in the three adjacent circles. Some figures have been placed for you.



ACROSTIC

By Emily Cox & Henry Rathvon

Guess the words defined below and write them over their numbered dashes. Then transfer each letter to the correspondingly numbered square in the pattern. Black squares indicate word endings. The filled pattern will contain a quotation reading from left to right. The first letters of the guessed words will form an acrostic giving the author's name and the title of the work.

1	F	2	N	3	B	4	Q	5	S	6	K	7	C	8	T	9	P	10	L	11	E	12	I	13	O	14	J	15	D	16	R	17	N	18	A	19	S	20	F	21	B	22	K	23	M
24	O	25	L	26	J	27	H	28	E	29	N	30	G	31	C	32	Q	33	F	34	A	35	R	36	B	37	D	38	S	39	I	40	T	41	E	42	J	43	L	44	M	45	O		
46	A	47	K	48	C	49	N	50	G	51	F	52	T	53	B	54	E	55	P	56	I	57	D	58	H	59	S	60	L	61	O	62	M	63	N	64	A	65	G	66	Q	67	F	68	T
69	R	70	J	71	E	72	I	73	B	74	K	75	D	76	O	77	C	78	M	79	S	80	A	81	H	82	P	83	F	84	N	85	I	86	D	87	E	88	T	89	Q	90	G	91	L
92	J	93	O	94	A	95	B	96	I	97	M	98	C	99	S	100	F	101	N	102	H	103	D	104	P	105	G	106	K	107	B	108	L	109	R	110	M	111	J	112	C				
113	I	114	O	115	T	116	N	117	E	118	P	119	H	120	A	121	Q	122	B	123	D	124	F	125	C	126	S	127	T	128	J	129	K	130	L	131	P	132	O	133	G	134	H	135	M
136	N	137	C	138	Q	139	F	140	R	141	S	142	D	143	A	144	B	145	T	146	O	147	G	148	H	149	C	150	E	151	N	152	Q	153	D	154	J	155	L	156	R				
157	A	158	K	159	C	160	P	161	H	162	G	163	B	164	T	165	O	166	Q	167	D	168	A	169	J	170	R	171	C	172	E	173	P	174	L										

A. Unconnected, incoherent; out of whack

143 168 34 46 94 157 80 120 64 18

B. Beaten on the sides?

36 163 73 3 21 144 53 95 122 107

C. Savior from a hostile takeover (2 wds.)

77 149 125 159 112 48 98 7 31

171 137

D. Connecticut's official state hero (2 wds.)

103 57 123 167 86 37 153 75 15 142

E. Vituperation, obloquy, vitriol

54 87 71 172 11 150 117 28 41

F. Legumes once a staple of sailors (2 wds.)

83 33 51 20 1 67 124 100 139

G. Fire feeder

162 105 65 133 89 147 30 50

H. Bank deposits for a very rainy day?

119 27 161 58 81 102 148 134

I. Team that last won a World Series in 1979

96 39 85 12 113 72 56

J. Group leaning to the right (2 wds.)

42 14 128 169 92 154 111 70 26

K. Big Apple offerings

22 129 74 47 106 6 158

L. Set up for interactivity

91 43 25 108 60 130 174 10 155

M. Green light (hyph.)

23 110 62 78 97 135 44

N. One with the feeling of being unneeded (2 wds.)

84 29 116 63 101 17 151 49 2 136

O. Pertaining to the eye

93 132 24 76 114 45 146 13 165 61

P. Started over, as a TV series

118 173 9 131 160 55 82 104

Q. Honeysuckle or Virginia creeper

32 4 138 121 66 90 166 152

R. Like the words "affright," "quoth" and "sooth"

16 109 170 156 140 69 35

S. Old plays in new stagings

5 79 141 99 59 19 126 38

T. Modern-day eraser (2 wds.)

40 127 68 52 8 164 88 115 145

THEY ALL LAUGHED

By Jacob Stulberg

Jacob Stulberg, of Otis, Mass., is a second-year law student at New York University, currently taking classes remotely. He's been making crosswords for The Times since 2013. Jacob is a longtime fan of the publication mentioned in 101-Across. When he was 11, he wrote a letter to the editors, which they published, correcting their use of the term "gluteus maximus." — W.S.

ACROSS

- 1 Some rappers
- 4 Music genre for Carmen Miranda
- 9 Pioneer in 35mm. cameras
- 14 Bit of bait
- 18 His face overlooks Havana's Plaza de la Revolución
- 19 Fire ___
- 20 See 67-Across
- 21 Refurbish
- 22 Architectural innovation jokingly predicted by 101-Across in 1982
- 26 Actress Perez
- 27 Performer's showcase
- 28 Gave out
- 29 God of love
- 30 Goofy images, perhaps?
- 32 Kitchen brand whose name becomes an animal after adding a T
- 33 Old N.Y.C. subway inits.
- 36 Wish-list items
- 38 Grooming tool jokingly predicted by 101-Across in 1979
- 41 "Gotcha"
- 43 ___ Sea, whose eastern basin has become a desert
- 44 Either spy to the other in "Spy vs. Spy"
- 45 Prop in a Shakespeare tragedy
- 47 Abbr. at the end of a planner
- 48 Classic board game derived from pachisi
- 50 Place to order a cassoulet
- 52 Writing aid jokingly predicted by 101-Across in 1967
- 55 Therefore
- 56 ___ block
- 57 Midnight trip to the fridge, say
- 58 "Yellow Flicker Beat" singer, 2014
- 59 Type of headsail
- 62 Super-duper
- 63 Shake off
- 65 Hammer out, say
- 66 "___ Lisa"
- 67 With 20-Across, yearly
- 68 Some sports car options
- 69 Painter Paul

- 70 "Them's the breaks!"
- 72 Butler played by Gable
- 73 Winter sport jokingly predicted by 101-Across in 1965
- 75 Treadmill settings
- 77 They're not known for neatness
- 78 Word connecting two place names
- 79 Word connecting two last names
- 80 Taters
- 81 Ragamuffin
- 82 Nominee's place
- 84 Telephone feature jokingly predicted by 101-Across in 1961
- 89 Porters, e.g.
- 92 Stampede member in "The Lion King"
- 93 Manual readers
- 94 "___ fun!"
- 95 Early smartphone model
- 96 Italian lager
- 98 Square thing
- 100 Like some rights and engineers
- 101 Satirical cartoonist, born 3/13/1921, known for dreaming up ridiculous inventions ... or are they?
- 107 Ransacks
- 108 Peter the Great and others
- 109 Eponym of an M.L.B. hitting award
- 110 Jellied British delicacy
- 111 Goes down
- 112 Fender product, for short
- 113 Windows forerunner
- 114 Droll

DOWN

- 1 Phil of "Dr. Phil"
- 2 Intensity of color
- 3 When the president may make a pitch
- 4 Ump's call
- 5 Comedian Wong
- 6 Gym array
- 7 Sweet bread
- 8 Not as scarce
- 9 Language not traditionally written with spaces between words

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
18			19					20					21				
22			23					24				25					
26						27				28							
29						30		31		32				33	34	35	
36				37		38				39				40			
		41			42			43				44					
45	46			47				48	49			50	51				
52			53				54				55						
56						57				58					59	60	61
62					63	64				65				66			
67				68				69				70	71				
			72					73				74					
		75	76					77				78			79		
80							81				82			83			
84					85	86				87	88			89		90	91
92					93				94					95			
			96	97						98		99	100				
101	102							103	104	105			106				
107							108				109					110	
111							112					113					114

3/14/21

- 10 Ambient musician Brian
- 11 Like Bach's first two "Brandenburg" Concertos
- 12 Like dice, shapewise
- 13 Finding it funny
- 14 Off the mark
- 15 Substance that helps a spaceship's fuel burn
- 16 Direct
- 17 It's greener the higher it is, for short
- 21 Glow, in a way
- 23 Narrow inlet
- 24 Part
- 25 ___ of Man
- 31 Exposed to high heat, in a way
- 32 Cosmetics brand with "Face Anything" ads
- 34 Ex-QB football analyst Tony
- 35 Word repeated before "again"
- 37 Move stealthily
- 38 Big part of the S&P 500
- 39 "It's co-o-old!"
- 40 Toss in a chip, maybe
- 42 Hid
- 45 Org. concerned with performance rights
- 46 Mace, for one
- 48 Oodles

- 49 "___ From Muskogee" (Merle Haggard hit)
- 50 Cartoonist Dave famous for "The Lighter Side of ..."
- 51 How anatomy charts are drawn
- 53 Mormon church, for short
- 54 Blow
- 55 "Mountain of God," in Exodus
- 58 Longtime name in cinemas
- 59 Hire calling?
- 60 Like slapstick comedies
- 61 Feature of a Care Bear's belly
- 64 Oodles
- 65 Hazard on an Arctic voyage
- 66 1960s style
- 68 Blues ensemble?
- 69 Slices easily (through)
- 71 Brush brand
- 72 Command+Y, on a Mac
- 73 Swizzle
- 74 Cartoon speech bubble, often
- 75 Whirled around
- 76 Sting, e.g.
- 77 Egg holders

- 80 Droop
- 81 Most sinewy
- 82 Its coat of arms features a marlin and flamingo, with "the"
- 83 Baseball's "Big Papi"
- 85 Since
- 86 Principles
- 87 Russian assembly
- 88 Gutter nuisance in cold climates
- 90 Apt surname for a ho-dog vendor?
- 91 Alone
- 97 Gobbles up
- 99 Suet alternative
- 100 Survivalist's stockpile
- 101 It might come in a yard glass
- 102 High toss
- 103 Crew's control?
- 104 ___ diavolo (in a peppery tomato sauce)
- 105 Year-round Phoenix hrs.
- 106 Sticky stuff

Puzzles Online Today's puzzle and more than 9,000 past puzzles: nytimes.com/crosswords (\$39.95 a year). For the daily puzzle commentary: nytimes.com/wordplay.



The New York Times

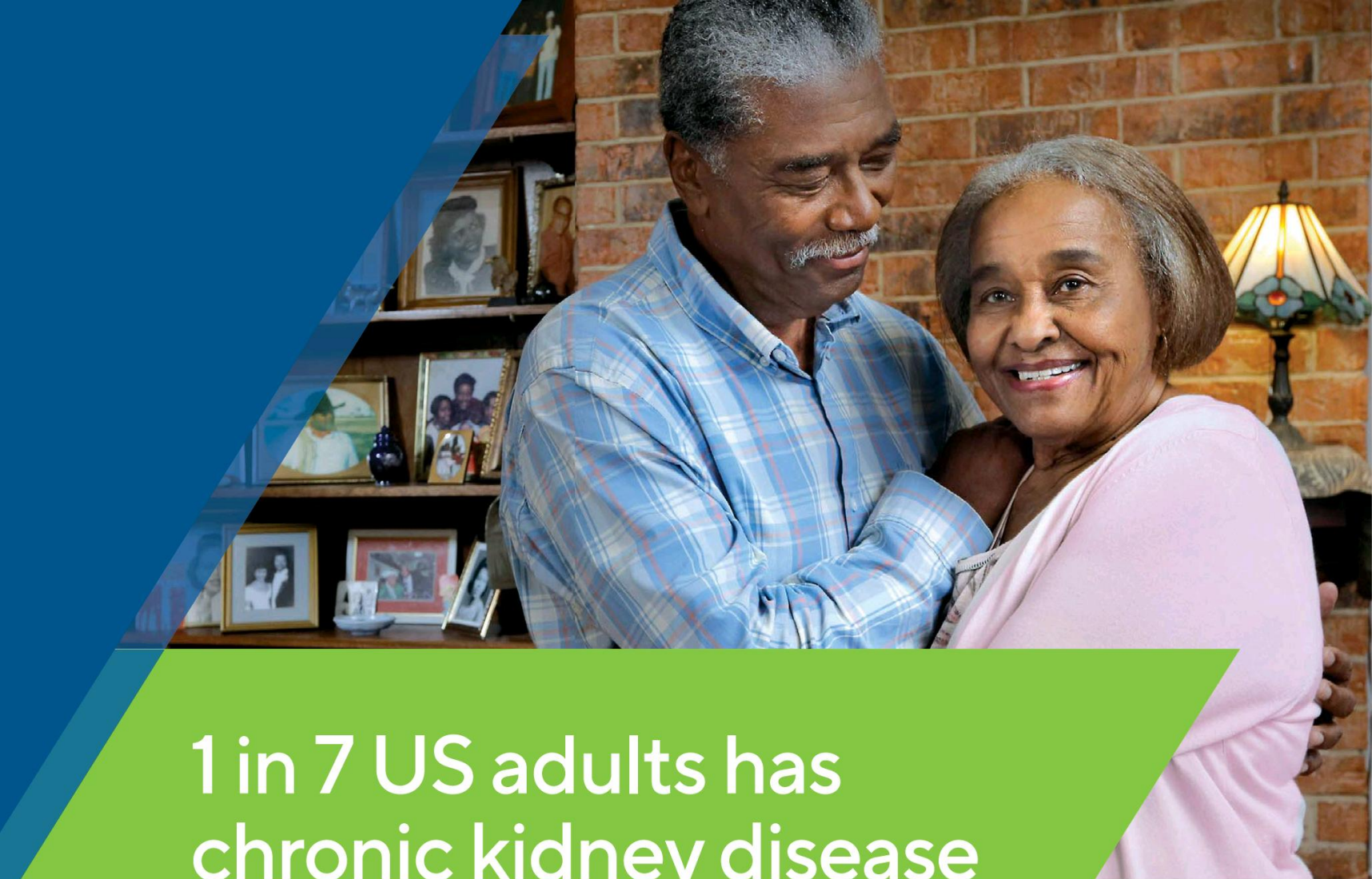
Cooking

Make dinner delicious
without all the dishes.

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[nytcoking.com](https://www.nytcoking.com)





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