Great Records You May Have Missed: Summer 2020

The best under-the-radar finds in hip-hop, rock, dance, and more

By Pitchfork
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It's impossible to hear all the music that comes out every day, but with this list we hope to direct your attention to generally overlooked albums our writers and editors have been returning to over the last few months. None of these releases were named Best New Music and, in some cases, they weren't reviewed on Pitchfork, but they're all worth a listen.

(All releases featured here are independently selected by our editors. When you buy something through our retail links, however, Pitchfork may earn an affiliate commission.)

Afel Bocoum: Lindé

Lindé is the latest album from Malian singer, songwriter, and guitarist Afel Bocoum, whose nimble-plucked strings stitch through the record like golden thread. Bocoum's playing and velvet baritone helm Lindé, but the surrounding textures and guest stars add vibrance and depth to the Afropop LP. Songhoy Blues' Garba Touré, Joan as Police Woman, and other musicians perform on Lindé, which was executive produced by Damon Albarn and Nick Gold. The closing track "Djougal" notably features late Afrobeat legend Tony Allen, whose skillful, understated rhythms ground call-and-response vocals and Bocoum's sparkling guitar work. After spending years touring with Mali's Ali Farka Touré, Bocoum showcases his distinct talent as a bandleader on Lindé. – Madison Bloom

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Armand Hammer: Shrines

Floating over an Earl Sweatshirt beat, billy woods’ exasperated voice is what you first hear on Armand Hammer’s Shrines. “Lord help me, I feel like the RZA/Like this is what I get for helping you niggas,” he says, sounding more like he’s speaking off the cuff than rapping. But soon we’re off to the races, and woods paints a vibrant picture of a summer cookout under the night sky; later, ELUCID enters the frame with his own nimble wordplay. Bolstered by productions from Kenny Segal and Navy Blue, among others, the duo wax poetic, blending anti-capitalist rhetoric with commentary on modern history. –Noah Yoo

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Like That Records

Ase Manual: Black Liquid Electronics

The New Jersey producer Ase Manual provides club heat with his own distinct flair. On his Black Liquid Electronics, Manual traverses the dubbed-out star system of industrial techno first discovered by the Detroit duo Drexciya, only to land on an uncharted planet in its farthest reaches. If you listen closely to what he transmits back to Earth, you can hear ambient stretches of synth, deliciously fast drum passages, and the distorted cackles of an explorer, amused that he was able to drift so far out. –Hubert Adjei-Kontoh

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Self-released

Asthya: 2015-2020

Bookworms and Via App are no strangers to techno’s woozy underbelly. While both New York producers have plenty of percussive barnstormers under their respective aliases, they’re just as likely to swap floor-filling kick drums for foggy squalls of electronic noise. 2015-2020, a Bandcamp-only release, collects demos and live recordings the two made as the duo Asthya; the album captures their combined talents at their most psychedelic. Where there are drum machines, they’re either slowed to a narcotic crawl or dissolved in a vat of distortion—sometimes both at once. Occasionally, they drop the beats entirely, turning their attention instead to growing electronic textures. “secret of wind” sounds like an unsuccessful attempt to jump-start a battered spaceship, and “u.h.s.” is ’70s industrial heard through a long drainpipe. With nightclubbing on hold for the unforeseen future, these far-left-field excursions feel more timely than ever. –Philip Sherburne

Listen: Bandcamp

Self-released

Asquomo: DIOBU

Ottawa-based artist Asquomo combines the sounds of hip-hop with the melodies and rhythms of his native Nigeria. On his most recent EP DIOBU, Asquomo explores themes of family, home, and the immigrant experience in his adopted city. On previous albums, Asquomo’s verses were carried on his rapid-fire flow, but DIOBU spends more time showcasing his rich singing voice. Standout track “Never Die” layers Asquomo’s vocals atop muted hand drums and brooding synths, while “Yahweh” stretches his voice over a scaffold of vibrant percussion. –Madison Bloom

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Whatever’s Clever
Caitlin Pasko: Greenhouse

The emotional blows delivered on Caitlin Pasko’s *Greenhouse* are soft but exacting. “You know you are a horrible person/I shouldn’t have to explain it to you,” she sings on a highlight called “Horrible Person.” Pasko’s voice is light and slow, her arrangement minimal: Most songs feature little more than a piano. She selects her words carefully, from a well of tenderness and introspection, and each one leads to a tremendous payoff. –Quinn Moreland

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Olive Grove Records

Carla J. Easton: Weirdo

The third solo album from Glasgow singer Carla J. Easton (aka Ette) combines the ominous glimmer of synth-wave with the maximalist fun of Carly Rae Jepsen’s ‘80s throwbacks. In her songs, Easton obsesses gleefully over star-crossed love affairs, hitting every beat from anticipation to heartbreak. “I was like, ‘Oh my God, he’s perfect’/I took a chance if it was worth it/Struck fools’ gold, lit a match/Hoped a fire would catch,” she rhymes on “Never Knew You.” There’s a hint of Taylor Swift in both her diction and her closely observed details, but Easton’s vision of bubblegum pop has the scrappy glamour of a homemade theatrical production. –Anna Gaca

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Halocline Trance

Casey MQ: babycasey

On his debut LP, the house DJ of beloved virtual queer party Club Quarantine offers a deconstructed take on the early-2000s boy bands that once demanded his love, longing, and sticky tack. Turn-of-the-millennium bubblegum-pop influences and pitched-up vocals run strong in the scene suddenly known as hyperpop, but few artists commit as hard as the Toronto producer. Casey’s got the screaming fans (actual snippets used, inspiredly, on multiple songs); the massive hooks set to titles like “U + Me 4ever” and “Celebrity Crush”; even original vocal recordings dating back to the era in question, when he himself was just 12 (on the ambient-tinged closer “Child’s Stadium”). His prepubescent performance of heartbreak fits well within the album’s pastel-colored world of pitch-shifted voice manipulations and human feats of falsetto tenderness, only adding to the feeling that babycasey explores concepts of gender performance and queer childhoods. The standout track, “What About Us,” is a bop so enchanted it reaches a dream-like state, harps and all, and yet the song never strays too far from Casey’s vulnerable vocals—his yearning to run away with the one he loves. –Jillian Mapes

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Nyege Nyege Tapes

Duma: Duma

Very little goes harder than Duma, the Nairobi industrial and electronic duo whose ferocious debut variously evokes a swarm of hornets, a migraine, a server farm, a dozen tennis balls in a dryer, and a flock of birds in a jet engine. Sam Karuga’s production punches through the low end of the range, while the throaty snarls and shrieks of Martin Khanja (aka Lord Spike Heart) chill the blood. *Duma* is the type of album that actually scares people—and yet the battering drums and sinister, quasi-melodic hums of “Lionsblood” could light up the club. The ugly, terrifying thrash of the apocalypse is also undeniably exhilarating. –Anna Gaca

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Carrying Colour
Duval Timothy: Help

Kanye West’s recent quest to gain ownership of his master recordings via an all-caps Twitter decree can come off like a teenage tirade but, for the first time in a long time, the guy's got a valid point: Black artists have long been exploited by music industry dealings that are shady at best, and baldly racist at worst. Composer and pianist Duval Timothy, who calls both South London and Freetown, Sierra Leone home, takes on the same issue with markedly more grace on "Slave," from his elegiac new album Help. The track combines a pitch-shifted sample of Timothy’s partner singing the word “slave” with inquisitive piano figures, a quietly explosive guitar solo from singer-songwriter Twin Shadow, and a repurposed snippet of Pharrell Williams wisdom: “Those contracts tell you that they wanna own the master and then every copy thereof is a slave.” It sets the tone for a record that explores the intricacies of hopelessness, finding shards of beauty amid the rubble of our modern times by way of placid R&B and fluttering vignettes that recall Thelonious Monk and Erik Satie. So when Timothy stretches out a recording of his sister saying, “Things don’t always get better—it’s not just a matter of time until everything works out,” it’s not a downer as much as an assured statement of fact. –Ryan Dombal

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Ezra Feinberg: Recumbent Speech

It takes a few listens of Recumbent Speech to realize how much is going on under the surface. These instrumental compositions, largely based around Ezra Feinberg’s melodic guitar playing, are calm and affirming, leaning closer to new age than the psychedelic rock he once played as the leader of the San Francisco collective Cita. With a backing band including Tortoise’s John McEntire and pedal steel player Chuck Johnson, Feinberg has crafted a complex and cohesive record, a guided meditation that gives back whatever you put into it. –Sam Sodemosky

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Flo Milli: Ho, why is you here?

On the intro to Ho, why is you here?, Flo Milli matter-of-factly trills, “I’m the shit and that’s my mood every day.” The Mobile, Alabama rapper proves it relentlessly across her brash and delightful debut mixtape, winding through hopscotching cadences and sharp couplets as she cuts her competition down to size or finesse yet another bump suit. Her playful, conversational delivery and sense of humor turn the mixtape into a buffet of one-liners with instant replay value, asserting her new rap star status with each joyful cry of “Flo Milli shit!” –Eric Torres

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Toxic State

Hank Wood & the Hammerheads: Use Me

It’s easy to overlook Hank Wood from outside the NYC punk scene; you won’t find any of his records with the Hammerheads on DSPs. But the garage-punk stalwarts have always played way bigger than the rooms they’re in, and their recordings likewise shout out above the noise of the 40,000 new songs dropped every day. Featuring four of the only five songs they’ve shared in 2020, their latest EP, Use Me, is scuzzy yet soulful, with twangy guitars that occasionally shoot laser beams. The band’s explosive energy is barely contained on their three LPs and various 7’s, but the mix here is cleaner than usual yet still raw, with distinctively operatic organs and pummeling percussion. Their old stomping grounds at S36 Johnson may be shuttered (for good this time?), and NYC DIY is currently on life support, but in the meantime the records remain, waiting to transport us back to the sweaty mosh pits of our recent past. –Matthew Ismael Ruiz
Hermit: Love Island

This sappy, perplexing, and intense work of beat experimentation comes from Hermit, a relatively unknown producer. Hermit manages to electrify the sounds of the L.A. beat producers like Madlib and Flying Lotus with sounds of deep house, old school R&B, chintzy synth, and rock. It’s a kind of electronic jazz that meshes styles and ideas together until they start impossibly sticking together to form something new. —Hubert Adjei-Kontoh

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Immanuel Wilkins: Omega

Last year, Joel Ross's Blue Note debut, KingMaker, introduced a promising young vanguard of artists that included alto saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins. On his own Blue Note debut, Wilkins composes ocean-deep jazz epics. The quartet’s instrumentation is traditional, but Wilkins and pianist Mica Thomas telepathically weave sorrowful phrases into timeless narratives of struggle. On "Ferguson" and "Mary Turner" (both scathingly subtitled "An American Tradition"), the band walls with agony, but with "Eulogy" and "Omega," their mourning is resolute: Tenderness becomes a foundation for a greater future. —Will Miller

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Imaginary Softwoods: So Extra Bronze Lamp

Mere months after reissuing his long-out-of-print 2016 album Annual Flowers in Color, John Elliott popped up unannounced with August's So Extra Bronze Lamp, a strikingly beautiful collection of drifting synth studies and new age tone poems. "Mr. Big Volume" is beatless dub techno, "Remember Seeing It" might be a chipper Oval accompanied by a chorus of crickets, and "Innerglow Portal/Aqua Drawer Lamp" sounds like Cocteau Twins and Harold Budd’s The Moon and the Melodies remade for a world with a fraction of Earth’s gravity. These sweet, succinct bursts of supersaturated color are more pop-like than the far-out escapades of his former group Emeralds. Play it for a "slowed + reverb" fan and watch their brain's pleasure center spontaneously rewire itself as a path to ecstacy opens up. —Philip Sherburne

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Jowell y Randy: *Viva el Perreo*

Puerto Rican reggaetoneros Jowell y Randy don’t quite consider themselves part of the genre’s “old school,” but rather intermediaries between OGs such as Don Omar and Daddy Yankee and the new school’s J Balvin and Bad Bunny. Their latest LP, *Viva el Perreo*, does its best to bridge this gap, flipping familiar samples into new arrangements, not unlike their show-stopping turn on el conejo malo’s “Safaera.” Bad Bunny produced much of the album, carrying the torch for perreo with beats that bump at just the right BPM for ass-shaking. Assembled remotely under quarantine, *Viva el Perreo* revoices reggaetón’s roots while facing firmly forward, championing fun, body positivity, and hope for a perreo-fueled, coronavirus-free future. –Matthew Ismael Ruiz

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Editions Mego

**KMRU: Peel**

When you’re stuck in the house for months on end, little noises—the whirr of an exhaust fan, the hum of a refrigerator—reveal themselves. Nairobi, Kenya electronic producer Joseph Kamaru’s debut for respected experimental label Editions Mego (Fennesz, Jim O’Rourke) sounds like what would happen if every suddenly conscious drone and burble in your apartment conspired to compose a symphony. Throughout the album, the 23-year-old, who has released a string of gorgeous records as KMRU during quarantine, smears treated field recordings and ambient tones to create engulfing sound worlds that are at turns calming, distressing, mysterious. Peel’s title track painstakingly builds up across nearly 23 minutes, accruing power with every repetition. At one point, what could be the trill of an ancient landline seeps into mix. Kamaru lets it ring. –Ryan Dombal

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Pipe Records

**Liv.e: Couldn’t Wait to Tell You...**

The Dallas-raised, Los Angeles-based singer Liv.e has a knack for describing the small moments of a relationship, the times you think about when it’s all over, like when the touch of a hand feels life-changing on “About Love at 2L.” Her light and feathery vocals are perfect to tell wistful stories. On “She’s My Brand New Crush,” she communicates the excitement and fear that comes with meeting someone new. They’re relatable experiences that’ll make you do some longing of your own. *Couldn’t Wait to Tell You...* is the soundtrack to falling in and out of love, and doing it all over again. –Alphonse Pierre

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Hungry and Undervalued

**Lol Coxhill & Morgan Fisher: Slow Music**

There is something heavy and dirge-like about *Slow Music*, an album-length collaboration between keyboardist Morgan Fisher and the late saxophonist Lol Coxhill, originally released in 1980 and newly reissued this year. From the first track “que en paz descanses,” you are enveloped in the dense texture of Coxhill’s sax, made to sound like an entire armada of horns. What you are actually hearing (in this track and the next four) is a heavily altered version of Handel’s Largo played by Coxhill, filtered and delayed for second-long intervals. The rest of the album was similarly generated by complex tape trickery; the title track was made by cutting the beginning of each note, looping and recording what was left, and creating a composition on the spot through tape delays. –Hubert Adjei-Kontoh

Listen: [Rough Trade](https://www.roughtrade.com)
No Home: Fucking Hell

No Home's Fucking Hell feels like an affirmation for anyone who has ever felt depleted by the sheer weight of trying to survive under capitalism. Heavily with unnerving distortion and blasts of noise, the latest project by London-based artist Charlie Valentine refuses to sugarcoat this malaise. Their brutally honest perspective on the hazards of exploitation and consumption is often clever and wry, as on "The Perfect Candidate": "Sorry, we've considered other applicants/Good luck/Have a nice job search/Have you ever considered/Fucking off forever?" – Quinn Moreland

Zegema Beach Records

Nuvolascura: As We Suffer From Memory and Imagination

Nuvolascura's second full-length, As We Suffer From Memory and Imagination, whiplashes between brooding passages of wiry, reversed guitars and torrential hardcore riffs. The Los Angeles band matches the intensity established by last decade's screamo/emoviolence visionaries Lord Snow and Youth Funeral (both cited as influences) and instigate their own kind of chaos. The effect is oppressive but cathartic—their screaming vocalist, Erica Schultz, recounts scenes of destruction while also grasping for hope. The album's final lyric, "Bandage my wounds, bring me comfort until I'm gone," howled over galloping drums, epitomizes the band's harrowing, indestructible presence. – Will Miller

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Ballroom Marfa

Roberto Carlos Lange: Kite Symphony, Four Variations

Though best known for the Latinx lullabies he makes as Helado Negro, Roberto Carlos Lange nonetheless has a considerable history of creating abstract and ambient sound art. His work under his own name tends to lend itself to the experimental, crafting exploratory beats and melodies that entice and encourage. His latest album, a collaboration with his wife, the visual artist Kristi Sword, is something less prescriptive, a meditation birthed from a planned three-week sojourn to Marfa, Texas, that turned into an indefinite quarantine after COVID-19 shut down most of the U.S. in March and April. Kite Symphony, Four Variations is an attempt to capture the wisfut light and air of Marfa's ethereal skies, an exercise in environmental ambiance guided by Sword's rhythmic graphic notations, visual representations of music you won't find in any traditional score. The four variations included here are merely a portion of the work in progress that comprises wind, sound, and light sculptures, a living document created in conversation with the setting from whence it came. – Matthew Ismael Ruiz

Listen: Bandcamp

Forever Living Originals

SAULT: UNTITLED (Black Is)

A restless, determined sense of fury saturates UNTITLED (Black Is), the third album from enigmatic UK-based trio SAULT. It was released on Juneteenth, amidst protests over the death of George Floyd, heightening the album's emphasis on Black perseverance and survival in the face of police brutality across the globe. (Black Is) channels that anger into something weightless and psychedelic, using a stream-of-consciousness approach that blends together earnest spoken word, bass-heavy '70s funk, Afrobeat grooves, and sweetly delivered vocals. SAULT's affirming music celebrates Blackness through a panoply of shifting moods, making for a vivid and timely set of protest songs. – Eric Torres

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Shirley Collins: Heart’s Ease

After a nearly 40-year silence, Shirley Collins returned with her powers undiminished on 2016’s Lodestar. Her follow-up, Heart’s Ease, is another exquisitely rendered collection from the beloved British folk singer. The 85-year-old tackles the bleak themes of traditional British and American songs atop acoustic guitars, banjos, fiddles, even a hurdy-gurdy. But she’s never more affecting here than when she sings a heretofore unreleased ballad she co-wrote in the early 1960s: “If we don’t make it this year/See what next year can bring.” —Marc Hogan

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Unseen Worlds

Silvia Tarozzi: Mi specchio e rifletto

Mi specchio e rifletto is transporting; across 16 impressionist, folk-tinged abstractions, the experimental violinist Silvia Tarozzi traces dazzling new constellations with her music. From the ascending strings and flute of minimalist opener “Al cancello” to Tarozzi’s jittering vocals and violin on the anxious drone of “Spazio,” the instrumental palette shifts between acoustic and synthetic, almost otherworldly sounds. Most tracks are sparsely populated with two or three instruments, allowing the contours of the melodies and textures to become fully visible. —Will Miller

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Musix International

Sparkle Division: To Feel Embraced

Disintegration Loops, this is not. The debut album from Sparkle Division—the project of avant-garde figurehead William Basinski and studio assistant Preston Wendel—departs from the former’s atmospheric solo work. It’s full of lush, reverberant sample-flips, dubbed-out ambient jazz, and yearning saxophone runs from the man himself. There’s a playfulness throughout To Feel Embraced that you might not expect, given Basinski’s often serious solo work. Originally recorded in 2016, the album was shelved following the presidential election because its creators were wary of releasing such a blissful record at a moment of tumult. Hard to say whether now is any better, but To Feel Embraced creates a world where it is. —Noah Yoo

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Planet Mu

Speaker Music: Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry

Speaker Music is DeForrest Brown Jr., a techno artist, theorist, and ambassador for a campaign to Make Techno Black Again. Following an EP and a pair of experimental albums, Black Nationalist Sonic Weaponry is his most cohesive statement to date, a 49-minute suite of purposefully uneasy listening. Opening with a recited poem about the police murder of Black victims, the album combines techno’s traditional drum-machine pulse with the radical ambition of early free jazz artists. Beats skitter and stutter across a disquieting landscape of spoken-word chatter, processed instruments, and viscous noise. It’s a nightmare that doubles as a wake-up call. —Marc Hogan

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Thiago Nassif: Mente

For more than a decade, Rio de Janeiro–based singer-songwriter Thiago Nassif has been bouncing anarchic noise and tuneful pop against each other with an expansive glee. Mente, Nassif’s second album to be co-produced by no-wave legend Arto Lindsay, is the best example yet of his fractured funk and silly-putty Tropicalia. Lindsay drizzles his skronked-out guitar over a couple of tracks, but contributions from more than 20 other collaborators make this album testament to a local avant-garde scene still bursting with creativity. The lyrics hop between Portuguese and English, delighting in the absurd. “You left your number on the fridge,” one herky-jerk chorus proclaims. Best pick up the phone. –Marc Hogan

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YN Records

YN Jay: Coochie Land

If you think hard enough about it, YN Jay’s Coochie Land is technically a concept album focused on his alter ego, Coochie Man, who is on a search for as much sex as humanly possible. Using a bizarre flow packed with frustrated screams and moans, the Flint, Michigan rapper hops on nervous, Detroit-style beats in order to declare he loves “Coochie” in every possible way. “Coochie Land,” “Coochie Scout,” and “Coochie Man” are all about what you think they’re about. Oddly enough, “Gotta Get Rich,” a track that proves Jay can shit talk as good as any Michigan rapper, is maybe the album’s strongest cut. “Nigga flashing all his unemployment/Oh you think you rich rich?” he quickly raps, taking a brief break from rapping about his sexual frustrations. –Alphonse Pierre

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Correction: A previous version of this article omitted the fact that the Lol Coxhill & Morgan Fisher album was a reissue. It has since been updated.