

Why Janelle Monae Is About to Be Your Favorite New Artist

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Actually, the best album of 2013 was....

It's overwhelming. In the past, only critics could really afford the luxury to sample or listen entirely to hundreds of albums. Now with streaming services, artist websites including entire albums and key tracks for preview, BandCamp, SoundCloud, YouTube and a ton of other services, it's easier than ever to hear the name of an artist and start listening to their music within seconds. Pay for a subscription service and chances are you'll be able to hear music by a much wider sample of artists than you ever have before. Or, of course, you could spin Adele yet again and wonder when her next album is coming out and why you haven't just bought her CD. Hopefully, a lot of people are taking advantage of this explosion in music platforms to range farther afield. Since it costs little or nothing to sample so many different artists, why not?

But with great listening power comes great responsibility: how can you make a Best Music Of The Year list WITHOUT listening to all those acts that caught your ear briefly, got a great review and so on? So with a lot more music to sift through, maybe it's no surprise I haven't felt ready to compile a list of my 40+ favorite albums of the year until March. But hey, any time is a good time to hear about new music, right? And for the past six months, if you asked me what my favorite album of the year was, my answer would have been the same. Because the best album of 2013 was...[Janelle Monae's The Electric Lady](#).

Never heard of her? Well, you will. [Janelle Monae](#) already has the respect of her peers. She's been nominated for six Grammys, she appeared on the #1 hit single "We Are Young" by fun, Prince called her newest album his favorite of the year, she toured with Bruno Mars, she's a CoverGirl spokesmodel (hey, anything to get your name and face out there!), Erykah Badu and Miguel and Esperanza Spalding are among the talent appearing on her album and that masterpiece ranked at #8 on the Village Voice Pazz and Jop poll of the best albums of the year among critics (only Beyonce scored higher among women). She's also performing Thursday March 27 on American Idol if you want to catch a glimpse of her chops in concert.

Maybe her deceptively simple new single from the soundtrack to the animated film Rio 2 will be the one to break her out.

I'm not sure exactly what will break [Janelle Monae](#) out but I am certain it's going to happen. Her debut *The ArchArachnoid* was in my Top 10 of the best albums from 2010 and her newest CD tops my list for 2013. Prince is a great reference point, as is Stevie Wonder, Erykah Badu and a host of other artists. Monae can seemingly do anything and she is determined to prove it: her new album contains instrumental passages akin to a film score, has a sci-fi concept (very minimal) in which androids are the new despised minority, gently tweaks radio deejays with amusing inter-song skits and jumps all over the map stylistically from 1950s torch singing to pure pop to classic rhythm and blues to fierce, committed raps. She'll make your head spin, your toes tap, your mind race and your lips say again and again with pleasure and excitement, "Who IS this??"

"Ghetto Woman" is wonderfully catchy until it catches you up short with some righteous indignation over anyone who would blithely condemn women fighting to survive under economic straits. "Dorothy Dandridge Eyes" is an awesome tip of the hat to that iconic actress. "Dance Apocalyptic" is the great hit single that wasn't, so infectious

future generations will be astonished it didn't top the charts around the world. And none of that even captures the ambition, the humor, the sheer nutty expansiveness of what she's accomplished on *The Electric Lady*.

Here's "Q.U.E.E.N." with Badu:

Here's "Prime Time" with Miguel:

It's just my favorite from a year that -- as always -- produced a lot of great music in a lot of different genres. Shame on me for not hearing more jazz and classical, but you can find great pop, rock, soul, country, folk, a little world and some works that can't be categorized except as "great." Linda Thompson delivered maybe her best solo album yet, Arctic Monkeys did the same across the pond (ask most Brit critics and they'd pick AM as the best of the year), Vampire Weekend proved they're in it for the long haul, Bob Dylan dug into the vaults for yet another gem (as did The Waterboys!), Bombino had the world music album to beat, The Lone Bellow brought Americana to Brooklyn and on and on. There's so much great music to listen to. I'm certain your list would be different, but share it below! And check out some of the music I list here. If you're a fan of the genre, chances are you'll find something well worth checking out. At the bottom, you'll find some early favorites from 2014 and a link to my master list of the Best Albums Of All Time, with my favorite from each year and top picks going back to the early 1920s! Start listening!

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2013

The Top 10

JANELLE MONAE -- *The Electric Lady*
 DAVID BOWIE -- *The Next Day*
 PAUL MCCARTNEY -- *New*
 FRANK TURNER -- *Tape Deck Heart*
 BOMBINO -- *Nomad*
 LINDA THOMPSON -- *Won't Be Long Now*
 ARCTIC MONKEYS -- *AM*
 JAMES COTTON -- *Cotton Mouth Man*
 PATTY GRIFFIN -- *American Kid and Silver Bell*
 VAMPIRE WEEKEND -- *Modern Vampires Of The City*

11-20

BOB DYLAN -- *Another Self Portrait*
 THE LONE BELLOW -- *The Lone Bellow*
 DAFT PUNK -- *Random Access Memories*
 LORDE -- *Pure Heroin(e)*
 EMINEM -- *The Marshall Mathers LP2*
 JOHN MAYER -- *Paradise Valley*
 KELLY WILLIS AND BRUCE ROBISON -- *Cheater's Game*
 KODALINE -- *In A Perfect World*
 PANIC! AT THE DISCO -- *Too Weird To Live, Too Rare To Die*
 MAVIS STAPLES -- *One True Vine*

21-30

THE WATERBOYS -- *Fisherman Box*
 RICHARD THOMPSON -- *Electric*
 RHYE -- *Woman*
 LAURA MVULA -- *Sing To The Moon*

BRAD PAISLEY -- Wheelhouse
THE MAVERICKS -- In Time
RON SEXSMITH -- Forever Endeavor
KING KRULE -- 6 Feet Beneath The Moon
MIDLAKE -- Antiphon
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- Divided and United: Songs Of The Civil War

31-40

ELVIS COSTELLO AND THE ROOTS -- Wake Up Ghost
CAGE THE ELEPHANT -- Melophobia
GUY CLARK -- My Favorite Picture Of You
BASTILLE -- Bad Blood
ALLEN TOUSSAINT -- Songbook
DANNY BROWN -- Old
THE AVETT BROTHERS -- Magpie and the Dandelion
HOLLY WILLIAMS -- The Highway
KACEY MUSGRAVES -- Same Trailer, Different Park
LITTLE GREEN CARS -- Absolute Zero

41-48

BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG AND NORAH JONES -- Foreverly
WILLIAM TYLER -- Impossible Truth
VAN DYKE PARKS -- Song Cycled
JASON ISBELL -- Southeastern
LINDI ORTEGA -- Tin Star
THE CIVIL WARS -- The Civil Wars
PREFAB SPROUT -- Crimson Red
VARIOUS ARTISTS -- Inside Llewyn Davis
TIM CHRISTENSEN -- Pure McCartney

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2014 (work in progress)

BEN WATT -- Hendra (due out April 29)
SHARON JONES AND THE DAP KINGS -- Give The People What They Want
BECK -- Morning Phase
JIMMER PODRASKY -- The Would-Be Plans
THE PIXIES -- Indie Cindy (due out April 29)
SUZANNE VEGA -- Tales From The Realm Of The Queen Of Pentacles

Go here to see [my master list of the Best Album Of All Time](#), with my favorite from each year and year by year picks going back to the 1920s. Here's a list of [the albums \(and movies and books and plays\) I tackled in 2013](#).

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of [BookFilter](#), a [book lover's best friend](#). It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide -- but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#).