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Entertainment & Life

On the Record: Favorite New England-accented albums of 2019

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It's been a good year for Worcester music: Rapper Joyner Lucas launched a torrent of music videos, stoking both local and national attention; local singer-songwriter Sam James appeared on the TV show "Songland" and co-penned songs for Bebe Rexha and Dolly Parton; and local rocker Ricky Duran captured the city's imagination with his astounding run on "The Voice," finishing as the first runner-up. It's enough to make you believe in the city's vast, untapped reservoir of musical talent.

With that in mind, this is a rundown of my favorite New England-inflected albums of 2019. I say "favorite" instead of "best" to acknowledge two things: 1.) That though I've listened to a lot of albums, I have not listened to everything, and 2.) My perspective is warped by where I work. Any "best of" list is a reflection of what the world looks like from where the author is standing. This is what the local music scene looks like from my desk. Vanyaland, the Boston Herald or the Boston Globe (if it actually covered local music for real) might come up with different lists. Mine is Worcester-centric, by necessity, but Worcester music does not exist in a vacuum. It's influenced by the artists from the surrounding region, and likewise exerts its own an influence outward.

These are the albums that have stayed with me over the course of the year, the ones I return to, even if I didn't have the opportunity to write about some of them. This is what local music sounds like from HERE, and from where I'm sitting, the acoustics are astonishing.

"The New Normal," by STL GLD: This offering from the Boston-based hip-hop ensemble — comprising Christopher Talken, Moe Pope, The Arcitype, Tim Hall and Jonathan Ulman — was probably the year's first great album, and it was a staggering piece of work. Bristling with rage that barely conceals a raw vulnerability, this album shows the power that comes from actually caring about the world. The question refrains throughout the album: "Is this normal"? Is violence and racial injustice normal? And then, the questions that burble behind that one: SHOULD this be normal? Why should we accept this? "They say racism don't exist," they rap on the song "With Me," "Imma raise my kid/Like the Queen she is/Or the king she is/You inside my battleship/Black/white/dark/light/smart/people/hype people/LGBTQ/Y'all my people too." It's a bracing and near-perfectly executed piece of work, one that cuts fresh with each re-listen.

"El Rio," Carlos Odria Trio: This collaboration of guitarist Carlos Odria, drummer Thomas Spears and bassist Geoffrey Oehling is one of the most jaw-droppingly beautiful pieces of work in recent memory, each note flowing with seeming ease into an exquisite tapestry. The all-instrumental album catches the listener in a riptide of jazz and Spanish guitar, carrying them away to a musical place that's achingly beautiful.

"Ghost Baby," by Dodeca: Dodeca is at its core a fusion band, marrying disparate musical elements into something a little bit greater than the sum of its parts. The band — drummer Angela Fiorentino, guitarist-vocalist Tim Greeno, vocalist Anna Hill and bassist James Moore — crafts what is essentially a country narrative with the album, and then uses elements of rock, blues and jazz to accentuate the familiar stories, making them simultaneously fresh and familiar. The opioid dirge "Ecstasy at the End of Days" is arresting as a howl from beyond the grave, whereas "Blue Collar Anthem" is simultaneously rip-roaringly fun and glistening with empathy. The album ends on a stunning cover of Dolly Parton's "Jolene" that demonstrates the power of Hill's vocals and connects the album to the great continuum of country music.

"Hexphones," by Walter Sickert & The Army of Broken Toys: Walter Sickert and his merry musical cohorts are entirely capable of Grand Guignol theatrics, and is absolutely fearless in the face of artistic risk, but what makes this album so spectacular is how it nails down a solid blues-rock underpinning to

support its more wild and psychedelic aspects. Whether it's the dirty Southern rock stomp of "Doomsday Disco" or the velvety, spiraling lyrics of "Siren Street" — "Burn, burn, burn/the Devil to the Ground/the Devil is me/this I have found/all my friends are witches, now," later shifting to "all my friends are dying stars now" — the album always feels strangely grounded, even when it seems to be venturing beyond the Mountains of Madness.

"The Nashville Sessions," Gracie Day: With this album, recorded in Nashville, Worcester-area singer-songwriter Gracie Day taps into a sense of wanderlust and small-town constraint to create a narrative that bristles and smolders. Day is an excellent vocalist, blessed with a smoky voice and an impeccable sense of phrasing, but really, this album shows that her greatest strength is as a storyteller. The heat of "Come a Little Closer" plays well into the ambivalence of "Last Chance," and the hopefulness of the opener, "Tennessee," feels like a distant echo when you reach the sense of stasis of "Some Things Never Change." She accomplishes a lot in a slim album, and not a single note is wasted.

"Why The Wild Things Are," by Cliff Notez: Boston rapper Cliff Notez asks an extremely pertinent question near the beginning of his lush and densely layered album, "Why the Wild Things Are": "Is it worth waiting on this magic? Do I got patience for this magic?" Magic is an act of transformation, and this album explores the idea of transforming personal and generational pain and trauma into something healthy. Perhaps just as pertinent, though, is the idea of questioning whether that transformation is worthwhile. Notez holds all of this up to the light and interrogates it, his persona walking straight up to the line of where the hypothetical wild things are created. Ultimately, though, with "Worth It" and "Get Free II — My Compiled Thoughts," he comes to a conclusion that feels enormously earned.

"Ghost Land," by the Marshall Pass: Musician Duncan Arsenault and vocalist Craig Rawding have created here a slim poem of an album, one which delves deep into a moment of impending loss, and lets the emotion roll forward languidly. It's a wistful and beautiful album, and every inch of it feels real and necessary. "When you've lost it all," sings Rawding, "Either walk or crawl/We walked on 'til we lost the horizon." This is ultimately an album about what it means to be on the other side of losing everything, and it's both heartbreaking and enormously cathartic.

"The Soviet Tape," by DJ Manipulator: Hopedale hip-hop producer DJ Manipulator is easily one of the smartest and most creative people in New England music, and with "The Soviet Tape," he walks right up to the line between brilliance and madness, taking sampled Russian albums and what seems to be pre-glasnost propaganda recordings to create a richly textured musical commentary on the nature of spin and propaganda. In lesser hands — heck, in almost ANY other hands — this would be, at best, interesting. More likely, it would utterly fail. Manipulator, though, never loses sight of making this engaging, visceral music first, with the commentary becoming the framework. The result is a poli-sci lesson you can dance to, complete with Russian Casey Kasem copycats and knockoffs of American pop music, and it's nothing short of genius.

"Cleo," by Oompa: With "Cleo" — inspired by Queen Latifah's lesbian character in the film "Set It Off" — Boston-area rapper Oompa has created an enormously affecting study of desire, deprivation and ambition, about what it means to want and need things in the face of poverty and voices telling you you're not good enough. The sheer sense of defiance in songs such as "Cleo N 'Nem" and "Feel Like Cole" is infectious. "Last year they wouldn't give me 30 seconds," she raps, "now they book me for these shows/they know I wreck it, I wreck it." And she does. The whole album, winding down to the gospel-infused "Thank You (Fed)," is an inspiring and spiritually liberating ride, electric from beginning to end.

"Frodian Spit," by Death Over Simplicity: In a lot of ways, this is very much an album about growing up in Worcester. "I was ill-born in the Seven Hills/not the Big Apple," raps DoS, and the sense of longing to be elsewhere is palpable. DoS is a smart rapper, one who plays well with perspective, and that serves him as he balances that adolescent wanderlust with more adult perspectives, particularly in "Childhood's End," which centers on fathers struggling with insecurities over their roles, where DoS echoes the earlier "Seven Hills" lyric, as guest rapper Danny Fantom says, "My life is like a blur/although it might be childhood's end/at least I have my son/and the child within." The album reveals itself as a subtle coming of age tale, one that's tender and insightful.

"There Will Be No Intermission," by Amanda Palmer: Lexington native Amanda Palmer, late of the punk cabaret duo Dresden Dolls, has created here an immensely personal portrait of her past few years, mostly centering on the death

of her friend, author C. Anthony Martignetti, and the birth of her son, Anthony. Between those polarities, Palmer is unflinchingly human, letting her fears, failures and vulnerabilities shine, and somehow, amid all the heartbreak, she finds moments that are arrestingly beautiful. At one point, she entreats the listener to imagine her singing beside her, and that's easy to do, the album's so shockingly intimate.

"Final Strike," Louie Gonz: Gonz has always been one of the area's best rappers, but "Final Strike" feels like a real evolution in his work. It burns with ambition and an indomitable sense of will. From songs such as "My City" and "Bad Habits" to even more personal work such as "Family Matters," Gonz creates a visceral portrait of where he's coming from, as both an artist and a person, and the unsentimental honesty gives the album a sort of electricity that binds it together, even as the tempo alternates between hard-hitting rabbit punches and more languid R&B stylings. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that an album called "Final Strike" chooses its shots very well, and hits every time.

"We Lifted Ourselves," by Thinner: This album is a blast of stripped-down, unapologetic rock 'n' roll which almost feels anachronistic these days, but it's delivered with such a high-spirited, unabashed love for the music that it's hard not to get swept up in it. Songs such as "Ride the High the Low" and "Party Crimes" blister with intensity and a sense of reckless abandon. Ultimately, this is an album about freedom, and that's a theme that's nestled at the very heart of rock 'n' roll. "The road is long we sing the same old song turn the radio on and drive away," they sing on the album closer, "Superhighway," and it's the same horizon from some '50s surf tune, some bit of '60s British blues or '70s New York punk, but still ... albums like this make you believe you can reach it, someday.

"It's Lonely Out Here: The JFM Story (Revisited)," by Ghost of the Machine: Worcester rapper Ghost of the Machine finds a captivating balance between racial politics and a personal sense of loneliness and alienation, excavating the intangible connection between the rage of the former and the pain of the latter. "If I had all the dollar bills in the world I'd be lonely," he raps, "in the zone all by myself/if I had a room full of bottles with some models I'd be lonely/and yeah I'm fine/I don't need no help." Elsewhere, the album's flow is abruptly broken by "Middle Passage," an a capella poem by Worcester's Ashley Wonder that speaks right to the heart of black cultural trauma. It's a whiplash

moment which brings the album into focus, but by the time Ghost hits the track "Beautiful Day," he's found a way to bring a ray of hope into the darkness he's presented, and that contrast shines brilliantly.

"Humans Are Special," by Thank God For Science: Jeremy Moses Curtis, the musical mastermind behind Thank God For Science and a member of Worcester band the Curtis Mayflower, among other projects, has created here a wildly chaotic collection of music that somehow, despite all odds, manages to create a cohesive emotional statement. The understated roll of bluegrass that is "Fingerpicking" gives way to the fever-dream of "I-O Moon Blues." Later, the odd soft jazz feel of "DaDaDeco" takes on the tenor of something reminiscent of '70s power rock, before it all winds down with the surprise viola in "Sitting in the Wayback." It's hard to say what's more amazing, that all of this works, or that it all feels strangely inevitable. As wildly inventive as this album is, there's something in it that's recognizable. It allows us to see ourselves in its chaos.

"Pandora's Box," by Danny Fantom: Worcester rapper Danny Fantom's great gift is the ability to balance whimsy with serious subject matter. This album cuts close to the emotional bone, as his persona mulls exploded relationships and his relationship with his young son. Fantom doesn't pretend there are easy answers, rapping, "I hope my son don't never see me like Darth Vader/ashamed of who I became ... I stay composed but the pain run deep/type of (expletive) to make a grown man weep."

"Set Yourself Free," by Way Up South: There are a lot of reasons to recommend this album, not the least of which is the excellent musicianship shown throughout. From rock to barrelhouse blues to honky-tonk and even gospel, Way Up South shows a mastery of the underpinnings of American popular music, and uses the varied stylings to great effect. But perhaps even more fascinating is the album's redemption narrative. It feels immensely personal, and the sense of gratitude that permeates the thing resonates with every listen. It washes over the listener like cool water.

[WEB BONUS: A playlist of some songs from the aforementioned albums, along with some of the year's biggest hits and a few personal favorites. Warning: Some adult language and themes.]

"Just What I Needed": S...

Victor Infante

1	Just What I Needed The Cars	3:45
2	Sucker Jonas Brothers	3:01
3	This Land Gary Clark Jr.	5:41
4	The New Normal Pt. I STL GLD	2:47
5	Feel Like Cole Oompa, Anson Rap$	3:24
6	Juice Lizzo	3:15



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