

TD's Top Ten for 2021

COVID 19 may have shut down the live music scene, but it also stimulated a good deal of recording activity. I was blown away by outstanding releases from new faves such as **Yola** (Stand for Myself) and **Christone Kingfish Ingram** (662), as well as longstanding faves **Jackson Browne** (Downhill from Everywhere) and **Béla Fleck** (My Bluegrass Heart), but all of them have now been nominated for Grammys. Congratulations to all, but that makes them ineligible for consideration for this list, which celebrates my favorite releases from artists not yet famous enough to make any other big time Top Ten list. They are listed below in alpha order. Enjoy!

Tia Carroll *You Gotta Have It* (Little Village) <https://littlevillagefoundation.org>

A true bright spot in the musical universe is the extraordinary work of Jim Pugh and the Little Village Foundation. You've seen them mentioned on this list before. They provide a platform for diverse voices to record their work, often for the first time. Ms. Carroll is a true *soul survivor*, a legendary Bay Area blues performer you may not have heard of, but should certainly know. Funky. Stirring. Essential.

Colebrook Road *Hindsight is 2020* (Mountain Fever Records) www.colebrookroad.com

Sweet harmonies and truly tasty pickin' and fiddlin' from Harrisburg, PA. Their sound bridges bluegrass, folk, country and contemporary acoustic sounds in a most pleasing fashion. They were a finalist for the IBMA Momentum Award in 2020. Closer to home here in Nor Cal, I'd be remiss if I didn't also give a shout out to rising star **AJ Lee and Blue Summit's** *I'll Come Back* (www.bluesummitmusic.com) . Acoustic Americana at its finest!

Jesse Daniel *Beyond These Walls* (Die True Records/Soundly Music) <https://www.jessedanielmusic.com>

Nor Cal Country! He grew up around Santa Cruz, as you might discern from his sensitive songwriting, but his sound is pure Austin City Limits, with plenty of Telecaster twang and pedal steel in the mix. Great driving music!

The End of America *Night is Alive* (self-released) <https://www.theendofamericamusic.com> Quarantine conditions have made it even more difficult for supremely talented independent artists like this to find an audience. They turn to Patreon, Kickstarter, house concerts and merch sales to keep the dream alive. Be sure to enjoy the fruits of their labors.... Intelligent songwriting, memorable melodies and spiningling 3-part harmonies. Truly special!

Paula Fuga *Rain on Sunday* (Brushfire Records) <https://www.brushfirerecords.com>

COVID caused us to cancel our planned trip to Hawaii this September, but this is the next best thing to being there. It's taken her a number of years to build out this album, funded by 408 Kickstarter backers, but the result is a work of hope, magic and tremendous heart. Don't miss this one!

Dobet Gnahoré *Couleur* (Cumbancha) <https://www.cumbancha.com>

From the Ivory Coast. Long based in France, Dobet confronted the challenges wrought by COVID by returning home and soaking up inspiration from an Africa on the rise. The result is an album filled with messages of empowerment for women and hope for a positive future... and you'll find yourself dancing to it. You'll be moved and exhilarated! More inspiration comes from Kinshasa, home of the legendary Congolese collective the **Kasai All Stars'** poetically titled *black ants always fly together, one bangle makes no sound* (Crammed Discs) <https://www.crammed.greedbag.com/kasai-allstars/>

Natalie Hemby *Pins and Needles* (Fantasy Records) <https://www.nataliehemby.com>

An established Nashville songwriter, this is her long overdue debut as a performer. For fans of Rosanne Cash and Kim Richey, you'll find yourself right at home here. Memorable tunes, impeccably produced, that stand up to repeated listening. One of my most frequently played discs of the year.

Noslen Noel *Con Sentimiento* (Cugate Clasicos Latinos)
<https://clasicoslatinos.bandcamp.com/album/con-sentimiento>

From Gúines, Cuba (54 km South of Havana). Sweet sunshine for a winter's day! This is the first recording from this young master of the 12 string Lute. Fans of the classic Buena Vista Social Club sound will be reminded of the late great Barbarito Torres.

Southern Avenue *Be the Love You Want* (Renew Records/BMG)
<https://www.southernavenuemusic.com>

21st Century Soul Music from Memphis, propelled by the dynamic sisterly vocals of Tierinii and Tikyra Jackson. "We must hold ourselves accountable when navigating tough circumstances in our lives. It starts with an inward journey into our deepest selves. It starts at home." Produced by Steve Berlin of Los Lobos. For fans of Brooklyn-style cool funk, check out **Durand Jones and the Indications'** latest *private space* (Dead Oceans/Colemine Records). <https://www.durandjonesandtheindications.com>

Jackie Venson *Love Transcends* (self-released) available from <https://www.bandcamp.com>

A stellar "roots" release from a singular artist. She is a legend in Austin, but somehow has yet to achieve the widespread national recognition she so richly deserves. She does it all... captivating, deeply moving

vocals, amazing guitar work and heartfelt songwriting. Did I mention she ROCKS? Balm for the soul in these troubling times. Another underappreciated soulful singer/songwriter/guitarist in a similar vein deserving of your attention: **Guy King** *Joy is Coming* (IBF Records) <https://www.guyking.net> Highly recommended!

Lagniappe: *Singular Voices*

The singer/songwriter genre is alive and well as exemplified by these three extraordinary artists, each with something unique to say. You'll be glad you gave them a listen.

Mary Lou Fulton *We'll Tell Stories* (Infinidad Records) <https://www.MaryLouFulton.com>

John R. Miller *Depreciated* (Rounder Records) <https://www.jrmillermusic.com>

John Smith *The Fray* (Commoner/Thirty Tigers) <https://www.johnsmithjohnsmith.com>

Finally, for fellow Byrds fans, I highly recommend the first album in 46 years from UK Byrds torchbearers **Starry Eyed and Laughing** *Bells of Lightning* (Aurora). If the founding members of the Byrds were still with us and gathered for another reunion album, it might sound just like this. <https://www.starryeyedandlaughing.com>

It's a tough time for musicians who have been forced off the road by COVID, foregoing their major source of revenue. When I know it, I've indicated the artists' own websites so you can order directly from them. I guarantee you'll make their day and help keep the music alive.

Keep on Rockin' in the Free World!

Tom David