

Voyager

The MagellanMusic Newsletter

Winter 2016

Every Christmas the Voyager staff looks at each other and says, "Is it Christmas already!?" Then we look at our credit cards and wonder how bad they're going to get beat up – again – this year. Which is the reason why we're always implicit about good thinking and smart buying. And also to think about music gifts and good suggestions since there isn't a music scene today. Record labels spend their money on highly sell-able products and artists that are like Las Vegas showpieces with no depth at all. Entertainment value is the priority. Singers are highly produced images propped up on pedestals and drenched with as much propaganda as can be bought. They're like Barbie and Ken dolls with different hairstyles and outfits. The only criteria is to follow orders, maintain the image, and be outrageous. But what has saved the day is independent artists and the massive re-release of old titles. The older generations are digging into the incomparable pioneers from those years with utmost savor, and the younger generations are smart enough to know that even if they can't truly comprehend the karma of that era they're at least brave enough to try. And just like in the old days they can feel the expression of music as a sense of freedom. No lines to toe, no rules, no inhibitions, no producer-cum-dictator-in-charge. Just play what feels right and take it as far as it will go. So with this in mind here are few contemporary 'retro' bands to consider. Nothing can ever match our inimitable legends, but it sure is fun to hear.

Bands:

Tame Impala – is an Australian band who began as home-bound Indie artists but were so good that they went professional and are now a name act. But the difference is they were attracted by that wonderful vintage 60's attitude. They were so good at bringing it to life that it was too alluring for fans to ignore, and were even nominated for a Grammy award. Their three albums are all good, but tops is "**Lonerism**" (released October 2012). They included more keyboards on it, which gave it a more colorful sound, as well as more complicated arrangements. Definitely worth having.

Elephant Stone – is another Indie band from Montreal, Canada, whose story is similar to Tame Impala. The main guy started a project of his own, inspired by psychedelic pop from the 60's, including fascination with Indian music (and the sitar), and they too progressed into a full-fledged band. They've also earned a number of awards. Three albums are available by them, and our pick is the self-titled "**Elephant Stone**" from 2013. It could almost be mistaken for something from 1970. Very worthy to have.

Foxygen – is made up of a surprisingly young duo from California who came together when they were only 15 years old. But unlike the others, they came across a small time producer (with a small record label) and recorded their first album under more typical studio conditions. It actually allowed them to expand more on their original recordings. They emulated the 60's ambience wonderfully, rather exuberant at times, and seems to impress everyone. Their debut album (from 2013) is called "**We Are the 21st Century Ambassadors of Peace & Magic**" and easy to find online.

Cloud Becomes Your Hand – When you go to New York City to find happenin' spots it's not the famed Greenwich Village. That died a long time ago. Today it's Brooklyn and one can find numerous clubs (and events) that feature a whole scene of Progressive/Retro Rock bands, probably the best of which is '**Cloud Becomes Your Hand**'. They have only one album available, "**Rocks Or Cakes**" from 2013, but as one reviewer commented, "It's a dense pastiche of knotty compositional rock, glimmering psychedelia, and hidden but persistent pop hooks, and this fantastic blend of influences and sonic shapes runs throughout the entire album." That says it all.

Herbcraft – is yet another that grew from 'bedroom musicians' to a working band, but they go deeper into the psychedelic realm than the others. "**The Astral Body Electric**", their third album (from 2013), is so drenched with effects that it's closer to avant-garde, like an oddball European release from the early 70's. Lyrics become irrelevant as the psychedelic wash comes forth, almost trance-like in places, and not all carefully arranged/rehearsed as usual. It's free-form at times, reminiscent of the German bands like Can or Amon Duul.

The Beatles are still perfect for Christmas

A few months ago Digital Music News published the astonishing story of the Beatles just as dominant on streaming sites as they were in the good ol' days of records. The Beatles are never first to jump into current trends and some were puzzled why it took so long, and even then it was iTunes only, but as of Christmas last year they were available on streaming sites everywhere. After just a few months they were leading the pack, more than 6.5 million regular listeners, and more than 65% of those listeners under the age of 35. It's clear that old silver-haired rockers aren't limited to old silver-haired fans. It's also clear that CD sales haven't dropped much despite streaming sites, so if you can't think of a good Xmas gift, remember that you can't go wrong with the Beatles.

Oh yeah, that 'other' band MagellanMusic

It is expected that we must cheat and try to sell our wares here too, but nothing wrong with that since we're pretty good:

www.cdbaby.com/all/magellanmusic – all CD's and downloads are available here. All are at reduced prices considering how crowded the market is, plus it helps defray shipping costs.

www.cafepress.com/magellanmusic – the site to get all kinds of cool collectibles, such as T-shirts, tote bags, and key chains. Cool indeed!

The industry forgets about used CD's

There were many who thought CD's would die when downloading came along in the late 1990's, but they were wrong. Now that streaming is top of the heap, industry geeks are saying CD's will die, again, but we're learning they're still wrong. Despite the fact that CD and download sales have fallen, no one mentions that the sales statistics only apply to new CD's. Industry watchers fail to acknowledge that used CD's (and DVD's) are virtually an industry all its own. Used CD shops began opening in the early 1990's as updated discs replaced old ones, and has grown so wide that sales numbers are estimated as equal to new CD's. It's hard to find a town anywhere that doesn't have a used CD shop. Used product was even a main ingredient in Amazon becoming a major entertainment retailer. But the downside is the entertainment industry doesn't like used CD sales. Artists feel they are getting heisted by selling their wares only once while companies make a living selling it again and again. Thus the reason for new laws and restrictions regarding used CD's in Florida, Utah, Rhode Island and Wisconsin. Florida is so harsh that some stores have closed. While it's great that an effort is being made to pay artists for their work, it's also great for the public to pay lower prices for it. Hopefully a medium will be found to keep both satisfied.

Is the music scene suffering from bi-polar disorder?

Something strange has happened since the new century came upon us. Major names in music are charging prices so high for concert tickets that for many it's unaffordable. If you saw Yes at the Egg Theater in Albany New York, you'd have paid from \$50 to \$100 a seat. If you saw the Moody Blues at the Scheels Arena in Fargo, North Dakota you'd have paid from \$40 to \$100. If you saw Loreena McKennitt at the State Theater in Minneapolis you'd have paid \$35 to \$100. That means you and your date will have a night out for dinner, a great concert, drinks afterward, and the cab ride home for \$200 at minimum. That's enough for Mr. Joe Average to think twice about such a night. So the question is why? Why are concerts so expensive? There are different reasons depending on the

source, but it seems there's been a flip-flop. In the Big Band days, before records and radio were prime items, the only way for musicians/singers/writers to make a living was to play live. But during the 1960's and 70's, record sales had grown so big that concert tours were actually extravagant promotions to sell more records. Album prices were higher, royalties were more generous, thus ticket prices for big name acts were from \$5 to \$10 a seat, which today would be the same as \$25 to \$40. Record sales were so good that some artists, such as Harry Nilsson, didn't play live at all. But today it's flipped back to the former. CD sales are so low that the only guaranteed income for artists is concerts, and why you see major names touring constantly but no new albums to plug. Let's hope the economy doesn't fall into recession any time soon.

Maybe streaming sites aren't as good as we thought

Every few months, the ongoing upheaval in the digital-music business forces its way into streaming devices; Rdio goes bankrupt, Pandora hangs out a "For Sale" sign and then gets rid of its CEO, and artists/labels ramp up their criticism of YouTube. From a macro perspective, there's a common theme among all of these developments, namely that in the digital music business only a big company with a big scale (and deep pockets) can hope to compete. It's little different than new industries with big and small companies alike fighting it out with the inevitable big fish eating the little fish to eliminate competition. And the main priority that all forget is the 'little man', the artists who create the very product that all the fighting is about, is the lowest on the food chain. Royalty pay-outs from every streamer are terrible and the ad-supported YouTube is worst of all. Who is to blame for this state of affairs? The music industry may like taking turns blaming each other, but the reality is that the way music is consumed has changed forever, and the moguls are trying to figure out how to keep it working. The small operators obviously won't survive, so the hope is that when the smoke clears and the Big Companies emerge the artists who make this happen hopefully won't stay lost in the shuffle.

Record stores, the good ol' days

When Tower Records closed down in 2006 a lot of people were hurt. Tower was a symbol of the great days when record stores were more than just stores. Bruce Springsteen said, "The reason people loved going to Tower was because of the culture, the community, the vibe, and the experience. It was a hangout for youth." And it was the hippie generation that brought it on. When we had record stores we could congregate, make friends (even the clerks), chat with others about new releases, or obscure ones, discover new artists, check out postings of upcoming concerts – it was an experience of communal bond. It literally stimulated the senses. Some stores included a head shop, magazines, posters, black lights, and lava lamps. Record stores became a custom, almost like moms regular shopping trip on Saturday. A new album gave a real sense of pride. We were glad to hand over the money to that friendly clerk at the cash register, and there was no rush home to put it on the turntable. It was to be savored, to plan the night around it, maybe even invite a friend over to share the delight. Just taking off the plastic was a pure treat. The peculiar aroma was better than a new car, and there wasn't a fingerprint anywhere on it. It was like a virgin. Then there was slipping the LP out of the sleeve to see the label, being ultra-careful not to touch its surface and disturb the magic within those perfect grooves. But after night fell the traditions came on; candles, incense, headphones, a bowl of weed, the record cleaner, and down went the needle.

There are some of us who held to the traditions, and still do, but as a way of life for a generation it's gone. It fell in the 1980's when bands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin broke up, or that greats like Yes and Genesis became Top 40 bands vying for time on the new popcorn channel MTV, but worst was a new generation of Establishment-loving Yuppies replacing Hippies that seemed to close the door. Even Abbie Hoffman's heart sank. There was hope it might somehow recover, such as introduction of CD's in 1987 thanks to the Beatles, but it didn't. So when the last Tower Records in New York City closed in 2006, the hippie generation truly lost part of its identity. Maybe the saddest part are those who can never know what they never had, like loving the beauty of honeysuckles but never tasting its nectar.

Whatever happened to Jazz?

No one is really sure. Any art form is likely to have problems from time to time, but one thing is certain, the Jazz genre has shrunk to an alarming 2% (or less) in America. Some think boredom has set in. If unaware of who the artists are, there's such a similarity that typical listeners don't know the difference. And that applies to Smooth and Trad Jazz both. Another problem is the complexity of Jazz music. A listener has to understand and appreciate the level of talent it takes to play Jazz, which most don't, or can't. It's why Rock/Folk/Indie artists aren't cut out for it. Still another is the excitement of Jazz. Or lack thereof. Is a listener going to tap their toe to the Beatles or Boney James more? Yet another is the fracture, or sub-genres, of an already small format. Sometimes it's difficult to know the difference between Jazz and New Age, for instance. Kenny G and Dave Koz could almost apply to both. And then there is serious lack of support from the industry in general. There is little (if any) PR from the labels, stores are reducing shelf space, and some radio stations have completely dropped the format. There are even a few large cities that don't have a Jazz station at all, much less clubs to see artists live. So the big question is where will it go from here? Will it shrink to the smallest percentage of absolute die-hard fans to keep it alive? No one can know, let's just hope it doesn't come to that.

Billboard charts are trash

By 1993, the iconic Top 40 was a thing of the past. It wasn't based on sales any longer, it was based on airplay. And considering that Hit radio stations weren't very popular any longer, which forced many to completely change formats, the 'Top 40' is essentially a myth. And today the Billboard Top 200 album chart is even worse. That too has become dominated by airplay or streaming sites and why many 'albums' don't even exist. It has fallen to a new term called "Mixtape". In the old days we would compile our own albums on cassettes by recording from LP's and Singles, and that's what 'mixtapes' are. They are posted collectively as an album on music sites, the total listens to each track accounted for as an album 'sale', thus their placement on the Top 200 album chart. Yet, they are nowhere to be found in a record store. And just like the Top 40, only new or current artists qualify for placement. Otherwise the release of Beatles music to streaming sites would have deluged the charts so bad that they would have scored more #1's than they did by sales. Are Billboard's charts a farce and just a means of PR? 'Fraid so.

So remember that this is Christmas. It's the best time of year to give and enjoy the smiles we will never forget. Happiness itself can't be bought or wrapped, so it's the joy of giving that moves us the most. And the gift of music is an entity that never dies. Billy Joel once said, "Musicians want to be the loud voice for so many quiet hearts", and he was right. It's the moment of release we need for mind and body no different than air and light. Without it, we might not survive. Music is a part of the sum of life and we must learn to cherish it, hold it, and love it. A divine part of the soul that's a keeper of who we are. So let's not lose it. Let us relish it's beauty and always share the delight with others.

"Where words fail, music speaks." - Hans Christian Andersen

Happy Holidays from MagellanMusic!